RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION OF FOREIGN PROFESSIONALS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN JOB MARKET: PROCEDURES AND PROCESSES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated procedures and processes used in the selection of prospective foreign applicants by recruitment agencies in South Africa. An electronic survey was distributed to the accessible population of 244 agencies on a national employment website, yielding 57 respondents. The results indicate that the recruitment industry does not have standard, well articulated procedures for identifying and selecting prospective foreign employees and considered processing foreign applicants difficult. Difficulties with the Department of Home Affairs were a major hindrance to recruiting foreign applicants.

Key words: foreign professionals; skills; brain drain; recruitment agencies; recruitment processes; recruitment procedures.

A census of the recruitment and placement agency industry was last conducted in 1993 when registered organisations in the sector were surveyed by the Central Statistical Service (CSS). The report identified 677 registered agencies (Central Statistical Services 1993). Currently, it is difficult to ascertain the size of the recruitment agency industry as no empirical evidence of organisations is available from data sources at the Department of Trade and Industry, Statistics South Africa or the Department of Labour.

A recent inspection of job advertisements in popular media and industry journals reveals that the South African job market is characterised by the prominence of recruitment agencies as the initial contact point for employment seekers (Harris, 2007). The South African labour market is characterised by a shrinking pool of skilled personnel, a continuous brain drain and a very slow pace of skills development (Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2007). Attracting and selecting skilled individuals become a critical issue for organisations to ensure that organisation's values and strategy are achieved (Bhorat, 2001; Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2007; Hall & Roodt, 1999; Lewis, 2001).

The intermediary role of recruitment agencies in identifying and matching qualified job seekers with the appropriate jobs forms the basis of a successful selection decision for the client organisation. According to Scholarios and Lockyer (1999) the recruitment process emphasises candidates personality, work experience and general attributes for senior posts and values interviews and informal sources of information in assessing these qualities. Scholarios and Lockyer also contends that recruiters of professionals attached more importance to an applicant's personality, and general attributes than to technical qualifications and specific job-related knowledge.

Skills shortage

Over the past decade, the South African labour market has experienced a shift from employment in the primary manufacturing sectors to a rise in demand for labour in the service sectors. The demand for highly skilled workers has risen by over 25% over the past 25 years (Bhorat, 2001). This trend is predicted to escalate. Hall and Roodt (1999) predicts a significant rise in jobs at the top professional level with 10% of jobs expected by 2003 in the South African economy. The

business services sub-sector was projected to experience an even higher growth rate in jobs contributing more than 25% of the total job growth rate (Bhorat). With an increase in jobs for the professional sectors, the demand for skilled personnel becomes more acute. Although statistics on documented migration are currently not reported due to unavailability of data from the Department of Home Affairs (Tourism & Migration August 2007), evidence indicates that a constant stream of professionals are leaving the country (Lucas, Amoateng & Kalule-Sabiti, 2006; Nel, van Dyk, Haasbroek, Schultz, Sono, & Werner, 2004).

The legacy of apartheid, which reserved better education and training for the minority of Whites, and led to under investment in the skills of the majority, has contributed to the current lack of skilled human capital (Bhorat, 2001; Lewis, 2001). Emigration of the better educated groups has eroded the meagre pool of skilled individuals (Lewis, 2001). The skills shortage is not unique to South Africa. The emigration of South Africans who are already trained indicate a trend that shows a high increase in skilled personnel in education, humanities, engineers and top executive and managerial personnel (Human Sciences Research Council, 2004). Developed countries such as Canada, United States of America, Australia, New Zealand and a few from Latin America have established elaborate skills immigration policies to attract required skills from outside their borders (Bernstein, 1998; Esses, 2001; Gray, 2005; Pellegrino, 2001; Private sector job ads double, 2007; Ward & Masgoret, 2004).

In view of South African history it was thought the labour market will favour the group of job seekers dominated by whites with high skills. A decline in White unemployment is reported (Bhorat, 2001) that can be attributed to either emigration or early retirement especially from the public sector. Evidence suggests that significant emigration of skilled white South Africans has consistently increased over the past decade (Bhorat). A worrying estimate of 43,000 highly skilled graduates between the ages 24 – 34 have migrated between 1994 and 1997 (Bhorat). According to Kahn et al (2004), issues such as the brain drain, brain gain, brain circulation, and brain development are an integral part of the world community. Issues of global labour mobility require novel strategies to reverse the effects of the brain drain, especially in developing countries of Africa (Nel et al., 2004).

The above trends pose challenges to the labour market in terms of sources for recruitment of skilled candidates especially for top level management positions validating the suggestion by Duncan (2007) that: "Talent is the new oil, and demand far outstrips supply."

Sources of skilled personnel
Common sources of skilled personnel include graduate recruitment programmes, retiring individuals who can be re-integrated into the workforce on a part time or consultancy basis and the open labour market (Bhorat, 2001). Expatriates represent another source of skilled employees (Duncan, 2007).

The demand for skilled professionals is high, with the brain drain and the predicted increase in jobs at the professional level cited as the major factors for the increased shortfall in skilled staff. Current South African government policies such as Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA) and Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA) are designed to address the current drop in registered artisans from 33, 000 in 1975 to 1,440 in 2005 (Olivier, 2006). Policies designed to attract skilled foreign workers (The Economist, 2002) however have not addressed internal issues in the functioning of government agencies procedures and procedures to ensure higly skilled professionsals are attracted to come to SA in order to address the critical labour shortage. Current skills shortage, especially in top management levels requires the government to re-examine the current policies such as ASGISA and JIPSA to be able address the skills shortfall.

Previous attempts by the South African government to address the skills shortage resulted in a Draft Green Paper on International Migration (1997). The paper made several recommendations for aggressive local skills training (brain train) and brain gain strategies for the short term. Brain gain recommendations are aimed at promoting links with distinguished and highly skilled former nationals to encourage temporary or permanent return. This would allow this category to become a source of skills (Campbell, 2002). The draft paper further recommends joint posts, periodic return visits and short term training assignments. Pellegrino (2001, p.118) proposes the concept of "brain exchange or brain circulation" as an option to counter the brain drain phenomena. In South Africa, Bernstein (1998) argues that the elaborate recommendations of the green paper for skills immigration are unworkable as they are costly to implement and could undermine the recognition of less formal accomplishments of local job seekers.

Attraction of expatriates as a source of skilled professionals has been used extensively elsewhere in first world countries resulting in positive skills arriving in the host country. Some negative aspects of skills immigration are however highlighted in recent studies (Bernstein, 1998; Esses, 2001; Gray, 2005; Pellegrino, 2001; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Other countries such as the United Kingdom, United States of America and Canada have implemented programmes to encourage highly skilled people to immigrate to their countries (Duncan, 2007).

Esses, Dietz, Bhardwaj and Josh (2003) reported issues of negative attraction and selection of foreign applicants when differences are recorded between immigrants and non immigrants in the selection for available posts. A study by Tukufu and Sibanda (2004) identified trends that exist in some European countries where differences are recorded between immigrants and non-immigrants in the selection for available posts. Other studies conducted in Canada, Australia and the USA (Chiswick, 1999; Esses, Dovidio, Jackson & Armstrong, 2001; Esses et al. 2003; Evans, 1991) present similar findings.

Hostile attitudes towards foreign immigrants
Hostile attitudes towards foreign workers are not unique to South Africa. Ward and Masgoret (2004) found similar perceptions and hostility from the locals in New Zealand in situations where competition for resources such as jobs and housing occurred. In Canada negative perceptions and the discounting of immigrant skills are well documented (Chiswick, 2000; Esses, Dietz & Bhardwaj, 2003; Reitz, 2004). Hostility towards foreign workers is evident in South Africa as indicated by reports in the popular media about the violence and tension that arises from perceptions by locals that foreigners are "taking our jobs" (Bronwyn, 2002). Recent events in Cape Town where immigrant workers have been targets of fatal attacks illustrate extreme forms of violence and negative perceptions towards immigrants that compete for resources and facilities with host nationals (Roberts, 2006). This trend is however manifested in the unskilled and semiskilled labour sectors.

Economic and labour market disparities in the Southern African region make South Africa an attractive option for skilled professionals and unskilled workers from the region (Campbell, 2002). Other studies suggest that most immigrants in formal employment in South Africa are skilled (McDonald et al. cited in Campbell, 2002). Insufficient data hinder the examination of the direct effects of skilled immigration in Southern Africa; however, it is proposed "that skilled migration contributes significantly towards economic efficiency at the destination" Campbell (2002, p.2).

Studies on negative assessment of foreign credentials by the host country labour market are widely acknowledged (Chiswick, 2000; Esses, 2003; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). The study by Esses reveals the devaluation of skills of foreign trained employees in comparison to local skills, even when the professional quality of those skills was equivalent. This devaluation is manifested in discounting foreign education, professional training and skills and other work related experience. Reitz (2004) reports that in the United States of America, acknowledgement of knowledge of credentials gained from outside the host country's jurisdiction has been slow. Esses' study identifies the lack of knowledge on the equivalence of education and training obtained outside of the host country as the major factor in the negative assessment of foreign applicants. This was attributed to the perception held by recruiting organisations that work experience obtained outside of the host country was not readily transferable to the new environment (Chiswick).

Bias and discrimination were reported to be prevalent in contexts where normative behaviour was unclear and justification other than prejudice was readily available (Esses, 2003). The ambiguity of evaluating foreign skills allowed subjectivity to play a dominant role in the decision making process. Esses suggested that in the context of assessing foreign emigrant applicants, foreign education and work experience may be used as a legitimate justification for prejudice in the selection process. Reitz (2004) found that recognition of foreign educational qualifications presents problems across the non regulated occupations. This creates an area of ambiguity which provides an opportunity for prejudice in the selection of foreign applicants.

Organisations in South Africa are targeting applicants from previously disadvantaged groups to comply with legal requirements such as the Employment Equity Act (no. 55 of 1998) (EEA) which requires favourable consideration of applicants who are not classified in the white group in all categories and levels of an organisation. Recent amendments to the EEA ensure that foreign skilled professional cannot be considered under the "designated groups" category (Boyle, 2006). A challenge for the current government is to efficiently implement the Skills Development Act (97 of 1998) which allows firms to be reimbursed for training employees. The workplace is recognised as an ideal environment for skills development and as such the government has encouraged organisations to participate by offering initiatives for the training of employees.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research approach

This research is descriptive in nature and is located within the quantitative research paradigm. The aim of the project was to investigate the way in which professional foreign applicants are assessed as a potential source of personnel to address the skills shortage and a large sample of recruitment agencies was surveyed to achieve this. The following generic research question was posed: Do the initial selection procedures and processes for foreign professionals address the current skills shortage in South Africa? To answer this question, the following hypotheses were stated:

- Current recruitment and selection processes are not geared to alleviate the skills shortage in South Africa
- Screening processes implemented by recruitment organisations negatively influences recruitment of foreign professionals
- The Department of Home Affairs' processes are a hindrance to the effective recruitment of foreign professionals.

Research method

Participants/respondents

Participants for the study were selected from a listing of personnel recruitment on the website using a South African search engine. A total of 400 recruitment agency contact details from all nine provinces of South Africa were identified and targeted. An electronic questionnaire was sent to all agencies with a status tracking to determine the number of recipients. A total of 244 organisations received the questionnaire; this elicited 57 responses, a rate of 25.4% from four provinces. The response rate was considered acceptable, particularly for a survey targeted at senior management and decision makers in the recruitment industry. The responses show that the majority of organisations were from two economic centres, Western Cape and Gauteng. As the survey was anonymous, a pattern could not be established for the non-responses.

Measuring Instruments/methods of data gathering

The researcher developed a questionnaire operationalised from a literature review. The questionnaire consisted of six sections: 1. Key characteristics of organisation and respondents; 2. Recruitment process and procedures for local applicants; 3. Assessment procedures for local applicants 4. Recruitment processes and procedures for job order applicants; 5. Employment Equity job order and recruitment of foreign applicants. Section 6 had two sub sections: (a) comparison and verification of foreign applicant criteria and (b) South African skills immigration policy.

Procedure

A pilot questionnaire was sent to 10 organisations, the comments and suggestions were incorporated in the final questionnaire. The terms "walk-in" and "job-order" were descriptions of job seekers obtained from discussions during the initial piloting of the survey tool. A walk-in applicant referred to a job seeker who initiated the search process. A job-order applicant refers to a foreign job seeker responding to a job search initiated by the recruitment organisation on behalf of a client organisation.

To measure the frequency of administrative processes or procedures used by a recruitment organisation, a 5-point Likert scale ranging from daily, weekly, monthly, sometimes and never was used. For assessment of foreign applicants a 6-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree; agree; slightly agree; slightly disagree; disagree and strongly disagree was used. Respondents indicated their agreement or disagreement with statements given as reasons for not considering foreign applicants for example: it is difficult to verify foreign qualifications and work experience; it is difficult to compare foreign qualifications to South African standards.

To establish selection prejudice, the survey probed three areas considered influential in the recruitment of foreign applicants. Firstly the respondents were asked to indicate on a 6-point Likert scale their agreement or disagreement with statements that listed challenges considered to hinder the recruitment of foreign applicants. For example it is difficult to process foreign applicants with the Department of Home affairs; information for comparing foreign qualifications to South African standards is easy to obtain. Secondly, perceptions on strategies for increasing skills development and policies considered to influence recruitment of foreign nationals were elicited to obtain agreement or disagreement with given statements. For example; my organisation targets foreign applicants who are suitably qualified for particular vacancies. Finally the respondents were required to indicate their perception on the current emigration policy and the effect on the recruitment of foreign professionals in response to statements such as: "South African immigration policy is not proactive to attract skilled personnel into the country"; "South Africa should develop proactive emigration policy designed to attract skills from the global skills market"; "Regional economic disparities will impact negatively on the region if South Africa recruits foreign applicants from the Southern African Development Community region".

Follow up emails were sent to the 244 identified organisations to increase the response rate.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics were used to extract the frequency values of respondent recruitment agencies on the given statements. The study used nominal and ordinal rather than interval scales, therefore means and standard deviations are not reported.

Key characteristics of organisations and respondent

Table 1 indicates that the majority of recruitment agencies are from the Western Cape (48%) and Gauteng (39%). Most organisations (79%) employed fewer than 20 individuals. Seventy percent of the respondents were female, with a relatively even age distribution of up to 50 years and very few older than that. In terms of tenure in an organisation a high percentage (65%) of respondents fall in the category 0-5 years and as such they are relatively new in the job. Only 7% of respondents had been with an organisation for over 20 years. The overall number of respondents with tertiary qualifications is reported to be high with 80% of respondents holding tertiary qualifications. Seventy two percent of respondents were white and 28% were coloured or Indian.

From the organisations surveyed, 70% were affiliated to an industry association in the personnel selection and recruitment industry. Seventy three percent of individuals who completed the survey were members of a regulating association linked to recruitment and selection.

Recruitment process for local applicants

Table 2 illustrates similar patterns for the recruitment of top managerial applicants and lower managerial applicants. Organisations attend to 84% of applicants responding to various forms of media advertisements. Headhunting of local applicants is a common recruitment strategy amongst the surveyed organisations.

TABLE 1
KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF ORGANISATIONS AND RESPONDENT

Location of Agency	No of Respondents	Percentage
Eastern Cape	2	4%
Gauteng	22	39%
Kwazulu Natal	5	9%
Western Cape	28	48%
Number of Employees		
Fewer than 20	45	79%
21-50	6	11%
51-80	3	5%
Above 111	3	5%
Gender		
Female	40	70%
Male	17	30%
Age		
20-30 years	16	29%
31-40	14	25%
41-50	18	33%
51-60	4	9%
Tenure		
0-5 years	36	65%
6-10 years	12	22%
11-20 years	5	10%
Over 20 years	4	7%
Academic Qualifications		
Post-graduate qualification	20	35%
Diploma/certificate	19	33%
Undergraduate	7	12%
High School	11	19%
Professional Affiliation		
Organisational Affiliation	40	70%
Individual affiliation	41	73%

TABLE 2
RECRUITMENT PROCESS FOR LOCAL APPLICANTS

	Questions	Daily N. (%)	Weekly N (%)	Monthly N (%)	Sometimes N (%)	Never N (%)
1	Recruits applicants in top managerial posts	20(35)	8(14)	(13)23	14(25)	2(4)
2	Recruits applicants in middle managerial posts	19(33)	13(23)	16(28)	7(12)	2(4)
3	Recruits applicants in lower managerial posts	20(35)	15(26)	9(16)	9(16)	4(7)
4	Attend to "walk-in" job seekers	19(33)	5(9)	2(4)	14(25)	17(30)
5	Attend to applicants responding to adverts	48(84)	4(7)	4(7)		1(2)
6	Head hunts potential candidates	35(61)	5(9)	3(5)	8(14)	6(11)

Assessment procedures for local applicants
In Table 3 findings reveal that surveyed organisations use similar procedures for attracting and selecting local applicants. Respondents indicated that interviews were conducted as a standard procedure with all applicants, with verification of employment records as an integral part of the recruitment process. A majority of the organisations surveyed report that they do not charge a fee from applicants for processing local applicants.

TABLE 3
ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES FOR LOCAL APPLICANTS

	Questions	Daily N. (%)	Weekly N (%)	Monthly N (%)	Sometimes N (%)	Never N (%)
7	Biographical data	54(95)	1(2)			2(4)
8	Academic qualifications	55(96)	1(2)			1(2)
9	Employment history obtained	55(96)	1(2)			1(2)
10	Other information	54(95)	2(4)			
11	Interview each candidate	47(82)	2(4)	1(2)	6(11)	1(2)
12	Employment history verified	47(82)	2(4)		7(12)	1(2)
13	Administration fee charged	9(1)6				48(84)

Recruitment processes and procedures for job order applicants
Table 4 illustrates that organisations in general had similar processes for recruiting foreign job order applicants to the local applicants.

TABLE 4
RECRUITMENT PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES FOR FOREIGN JOB ORDER APPLICANTS

		Daily N (%)	Weekly N (%)	Monthly N (%)	Sometimes N (%)	Never N (%)
14	Job orders via telephone	44(77)	2(4)	2(4)	7(12)	2(4)
15	Job orders via written communication	22(39)	3(5)	2(4)	14(25) 12(21)	16(28) 2(4)
16	Interview client organisation for job order	32(56)	9(16)	2(4)		
17	Biographical data	55(96)	2(4)			
18	Academic qualifications	55(96)	2(4)			
19	Employment history obtained	55(96)	2(4)			
20	Special information	52(93)	2(4)		2(4)	
21	Interview job applicant	47(82)	2(4)	1(2)	7(12)	
22	Employment history verified	47(82)	3(5)	1(2)	6(11)	
23	Advertises in national media	22(39)	11(19)	4(7)	16(28)	4(7)
24	Advertises in professional journals	18(32)	1(2)	6(11)	17(30)	15(26)
25	Advertises on the Web	48(84)	2(4)	2(4)	5(9)	
26	Uses professional and personal networks	37(65)	5(9)	1(2)	11(19)	3(5)

Diversity job orders and recruitment of foreign applicants
Table 5 presents frequency of requests for equity and diversity applicants through job orders. A majority of respondents reported receiving job order with specific requirements for diversity and employment equity candidates. Most respondents in the survey revealed that they seldom or never (65%) receive or recruit foreign applicants.

TABLE 5
DIVERSITY JOB ORDERS AND RECRUITMENT OF FOREIGN APPLICANTS

	Questions	Daily N (%)	Weekly N (%)	Monthly N (%)	Sometimes N (%)	Never N (%)
27	Employment equity job orders	35(61)	11(19)	2(4)	6(11)	3(5)
28	Employment diversity job orders	38(67)	9(16)	3(5)	5(9)	2(4)
29	Non-South African applicants	13(23)	4(7)	3(5)	26(46)	11(19)
30	Foreign applicant procedures	13(23)	3(5)	4(7)	21(37)	16(28)
31	Frequency of foreign applicant job orders	9(16)	6(11)	5(9)	26(46)	11(19)

Comparison and verification of foreign criteria

Several factors were identified as the reason for the low frequency of recruiting foreign applicants. The verification of foreign applicant qualifications and experience was identified as a major hindrance in the recruitment of foreign applicants. Another issue that was considered a major deterrent was the Department of Home Affairs processing of work permits. This was singled out as posing a major challenge that hinders the consideration of foreign applicants. Difficulty with verifying applicants' foreign credentials are reported as another challenge in placement of foreign applicants. The comparison of foreign qualifications and experience to South African standards and the articulation of the standards for comparison are cited as some of the main reasons why recruitment organisations do not consider foreign applicants.

TABLE 6
COMPARISON AND VERIFICATION OF FOREIGN CRITERIA

	Questions	SA N (%)	AG N (%)	SLA N (%)	SLD N (%)	DIS N (%)	SDI N (%)
32	Does not consider foreign applicants	13(23)	6(11)	5(9)	9(16)	15(26)	9(16)
33	Difficulty processing with home affairs	31(54)	8(14)	9(16)	4(7)	4(7)	1(2)
34	Difficulty verifying foreign qualifications	27(47)	12(21)	4(7)	6(11)	5(9)	3(5)
35	Understands criteria for comparing foreign qualifications	23(40)	10(18)	8(14)	4(9)	6(11)	4(9)
36	Does not understand criteria for comparison of qualifications	10(18)	3(5)	6(11)	10(18)	17(30)	11(19)
37	Difficulty comparing foreign qualifications to South African standards	10(18)	12(21)	6(11)	11(19)	12(21)	6(11)
38	Comparison criteria is well articulated	13(23)	4(7)	15(26)	5(9)	15(26)	5(9)
39	comparison info not easy to obtain	14(25)	10(18)	7(12)	10(18)	10(18)	6(11)
40	Comparison criteria inhibits consideration	17(30)	10(18)	9(16)	6(11)	13(23)	2(4)
41	Head hunts foreign applicants	15(26)	3(5)	2(4)	6(11)	21(37)	10(18)

Key: SA = Strongly Agree; AG = Agree; SLA = Slightly Agree; SLD = Slightly Disagree; DIS = Disagree SDI = Strongly Disagree. Calculated from measurements based on a 6-point scale.

The study revealed that organisations do not often process foreign applicants. In response to the statement "my organisation has established processes for processing foreign applicants",

65% of respondents indicated they did not have established procedures for processing foreign job applicants. Generally respondents reported difficulty with recruiting and processing foreign applicants as reported in Table 6.

Challenges in the verification of foreign experience and qualifications and difficulties with the Department of Home Affairs are reported by respondents. In response to statements on targeting foreign applicants, most of the respondents reported that they did not head hunt foreign applicants.

A high percentage of respondents reported difficulty with the verification of foreign qualifications and work experience. The criteria for assessment of foreign qualifications were not well understood most of the respondents. In response to the statement "criteria for assessment of foreign qualifications are not well articulated", of respondents agreed with the statement. Respondents considered the criteria for considering foreign applicants as a hindrance to recruiting from this source for the labour market.

Skills immigration policies

Findings reveal that South Africa does not have a proactive skills emigration policy to attract the required skills to address the current skills shortage. Respondents indicated that skills emigration should be determined by labour demand and were of the opinion that South Africa should develop proactive emigration policies to address the skills shortage.

TABLE 7
SKILLS IMMIGRATION POLICIES

	Questions	SA N (%)	AG N (%)	SLA N (%)	SLD N (%)	DIS N (%)	SDI N (%)
42	Skills immigration policy not proactive to attract foreign skilled applicants	26(46)	13(23)	6(11)	6(11)	5(9)	1(2)
43	SA should develop proactive skills immigration policies	31(54)	13(23)	5(9)	1(2)	5(9)	2(4)
44	SA has serious shortage at higher levels of labour market	31(54)	11(19)	8(14)	2(4)	4(7)	2(2)
45	SA has serious shortage at middle level of labour market	24(42)	9(16)	8(14)	2(4)	12(21)	2(4)
46	SA has serious shortage at lower level of labour market	11(19)	2(4)	1(2)	9(16)	19(33)	15(26)
47	Recruiting from SADC will impact negatively on region due to economic disparities	16(28)	7(12)	9(16)	8(14)	12(21)	5(9)
48	Labour market need should influence strategic immigration	31(54)	16(28)	5(9)	3(5)	2(4)	
49	Skills development strategies should be accelerated	46(81)	9(16)	1(2)	1(2)		
50	Organisation is affiliated to professional association	31(54)	9(16)		2(4)	12(21)	3(5)
51	Respondent is affiliated to a professional association	32(56)	9(16)	1(2)	2(4)	11(19)	2(4)

Key: SA = Strongly Agree AG = Agree SLA = Slightly Agree SLD = Slightly Disagree DIS = Disagree SDI = Strongly Disagree Calculated from measurements based on a 6-point scale.

There was general consensus amongst respondents regarding the levels at which the skills shortage prevails, in line with current labour market trends. Statements on skills development policies revealed that respondents agreed that there was a skills shortage at the top and middle levels of professions. Respondents agreed that there was no skills shortage at the lower level of the labour market. These findings are in line with widely accepted knowledge on skills shortages in the South African labour market.

In response to the statement on urgent strategies to accelerate skills development, respondents were in agreement with the statement that there was urgent need for strategies directly aimed at skills development to be accelerated to address the skills shortage.

DISCUSSION

Similar processes and procedures are used to process both walk-in and job order applicants. Where processes and procedures exist, there is relatively little standardisation among recruitment agencies to ensure that quality of service is maintained and assured to client organisations and applicants. This creates a gap for involvement for the recruitment industry to propose and establish a "code of conduct" for the industry. Given that 70% of respondents are affiliated to a profession, the recruitment industry can exert influence for the development of a standardised protocol for recruiting organisations to follow in an effort to work towards a regulated industry.

The large number of recruitment agencies who attend to applicants responding to various media advertisements (84%) indicates the critical role of recruitment agencies in the process of sourcing professional and skilled personnel. Making a wrong hiring decision is costly in a financial and other non-tangible ways as exemplified by the recent inefficient screening of an applicant by a recruitment agency (Harris, 2007). Here an inappropriate appointment resulted in physical, verbal and sexual abuse of students and the organisation has suffered irreparable harm to its reputation. Agencies are tasked to recruit skilled personnel from a depleted employment pool, the screening of applicants in this environment makes this task doubly difficult. This creates an environment where head hunting and informal networks prosper (Scholaris & Lockyer 1999). The use of informal networks to source candidates for vacancies is preferred and perceived as a reliable source of prospective employees by both recruitment agencies and client organisations. This confirms earlier results on the size of organisation and preferred for use of informal networks for recruitment purposes (Scholaris & Lockyer 1999). The high value placed on informal sources of information in assessing applicants can imply that candidates who are not local to the environment will not be readily considered for available positions.

Findings from the study imply that recruitment organisations use similar processes and procedures for foreign and local job applicants. Organisations report receiving a high number of employment equity job orders with 80% of organisations attending to employment equity requests. The limited pool of black applicants with the desired skills means that recruitment agencies have to source equity applicants beyond the South African borders.

However, several factors were identified as a hindrance to foreign applicant recruitment. Difficulties with verification of foreign qualifications and work experience emerged as one of the major reasons for not recruiting foreign applicants. This has a negative effect for applicants of foreign origin as employment organisations who review their curricula vitae do evaluate skills and qualifications as a standard procedure. The study revealed that organisations had difficulty understanding the criteria for assessment and comparing foreign qualifications and credentials to the South African equivalent. Ambiguity in recruitment processes and procedures increased the chances of prejudice towards a foreign applicant by an organisation. Both Esses (2003), and Ward and Masgoret (2004) established that when the criteria used for recruitment are vague it could potentially lead to prejudice during the selection process. Concerns that foreign qualifications and work experience may not be relevant to the South African context are ambiguous and vague and therefore may pose as an excuse for not considering a foreign applicant. Such attitudes and perceptions have the potential to result in prejudice and discrimination in the evaluation of foreign job applicants (Esses, 2003).

Respondents identify the Department of Home Affairs as a major hindrance to recruiting skilled foreign candidates. The South African business community has consistently accused the Department of Home Affairs of hindering efforts to recruit scarce skilled resources (Boyle, 2006; Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2007). Inefficient service when trying to obtain work permits for applicants is cited as one of the reasons recruitment agencies are discouraged from considering foreign applicants. The poor service at Home Affairs is attributed to "senior managers who do not pull their weight" (Boyle 2006 p. 39), implying a lack of either skilled personnel or commitment to ensure that quality service is provided. This finding is not unique to South Africa. In Canada, it has been established that potential employers routinely ignore foreign applicants with foreign qualifications Esses (2003). Problems encountered between government agencies involved in the processing of foreign applicants, the client organisation, the recruitment agency, and the Department of Home Affairs create a "multi-jurisdictional nightmare" (Immigrants Welcome, 2004).

The slightly higher percentage of placements occurring at lower management levels in comparison to high and middle managerial positions does not provide a solution to the current skills shortage where a gap of expertise is evident at top management levels of the labour market. However, the recruitment of graduates is an acknowledged source of skills development as a long term effort to address the skills shortage in South Africa (Bhorat, 2001; Lewis, 2001).

Most respondents would like to see the government play a more active role in skills development with accelerated programmes to alleviate the brain drain. A "brain gain" strategy is suggested by the majority of respondents, implying that foreign highly skilled personnel should be enticed to come to South Africa. Respondents view the current skills immigration policy as reactive rather than proactive. The majority of respondents 86% would like to see a proactive skills immigration policy implemented to address the current skills shortage.

Despite the skills shortage, respondents would not want to see skills immigration from the SADC region and Africa for fear of "depleting" other neighbouring countries of scarce skill resources. This finding suggests negative bias towards the recruitment of professionals from the African region and could actually be a subtle form of xenophobia towards people from the African continent. Further research needs to be done before a definitive case can be made in this regard.

Two important viewpoints on skills migration to South Africa emerged from the present research. Firstly, there are those who would encourage skills immigration to ensure the current skills shortage is rectified, citing the contribution that these skills would bring to the country's development as a reason for encouraging foreign skills acquisition. Secondly, those who oppose skills immigration alleging that such a practice would impede the training and development of nationals and would lead to exclusion from economic participation.

The globalisation of labour markets mean that conditions suitable for a high mobility of skilled individuals has emerged in multinational organisations and the academic workplace (Bhorat, 2001). This means the immigration of skilled

personnel to South Africa would be enhanced by a supporting environment for recruitment organisations in terms of standardisation of processes and procedures. The government can contribute to reducing the skills shortage by ensuring that favourable policies are in place to attract skilled professionals. Skills development of local nationals can be accelerated for future sustainability of a solid skills base through mentoring programmes utilising skilled expatriates as guides for training and development.

Creating a unified body in both organisational and individual affiliation for the recruitment industry would go a long way towards consolidating the industry and creating an environment where organisations can develop a unified strategy to address the skills shortage.

Conclusion

In a report the Centre for Development and Enterprise (2007) concludes: "We are failing to meet the increased demand for skills which we need to feed both the private sector of an economy that is growing faster and needs to grow faster yet, as well as a public sector that is failing at basic levels of service delivery, never mind the great ambitions of the 'developmental state' ..." (p. 13).

The results of the present study suggest that recruitment agencies cater for a wide range of professions and that no standardised regulated procedures currently exist to guide the initial selection of either local or foreign applicants. Furthermore, findings suggest that foreigners are prejudiced in the recruitment process due to the difficulty experienced by recruitment agencies in the comparison of foreign qualifications and skills and also due to difficult in understanding the criteria for making such comparison (cf. Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2007). The difficulties that client organisations experience with the Department of Home Affairs reinforce the negative evaluation of foreign applicants by the agencies. Of particular importance is the suggestion from findings that the problem of processing foreign skilled applicants with home affairs is a hindrance to the recruitment of skilled immigrants. In this regard the Centre for Development and Enterprise (2007) states: "Our immigration system is flawed in conception and in its capacity to deliver, and it is obstructing our ability to recruit the skilled people we need from abroad" (p. 13).

It is likely that recruitment agencies can benefit from a unified regulatory body to ensure quality control of services offered to their clients. Professional organisations such as the Association for Personnel Service Organisations may play an important role in ensuring that recruitment agencies are working in accordance with Department of Labour guidelines and professional standards are established.

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