

Critical Literature Review on Bridging Skills Gap through Development of Professional Courses: A Remedy for Unemployment Crisis in Kenya

Susan Muthoni Meta

Senior Human Resource Development Officer at Parliamentary Service Commission, Nairobi, Kenya

Email: susanmetanjogu@gmail.com

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Abstract

In the fast-paced world we live in today, there is a gap between what employers want and the skills employees have. The skills required to succeed in the future may not be the same as the skills acquired through our formal education. Adapting to the rapid changes in technology and knowledge production in the 21st century is becoming more difficult yet necessary. Unemployment in Kenya is a growing challenge that requires long term sustainable solution. The purpose of this paper was to create an insight on the need of conducting research on various skills gaps to inform the training of the employable population both in the informal and formal sectors in Kenya. The study was based on literature review to inform the conclusion. The study established that skill gaps exist in the formal and informal sectors that make it challenging for people to secure employment. The study conclusions recommend that; Kenya as a growing economy in the world must focus on developing her human capacity through professional development courses and programs. The educational institutions should consider conducting more researches on skills gap to be able to align their training curriculums with the demands of the labour market in both formal and informal sectors.

Keywords

Unemployment, Professional Development, Education Curriculum

1. Introduction

Kenya is a third world country with a growing economy and population of unemployed people. In the fast-paced world we live in today, there is a gap between

what employers want and the skills employees have. The skills required to succeed in the future may not be the same as the skills acquired through our formal education. Adapting to the rapid changes in technology and knowledge production in the 21st century is becoming more difficult yet necessary. Education has traditionally focused more on theoretical knowledge and although this is important, our growing economy requires individuals who are able to come up with practical solutions to problems.

The rising demand for secondary and higher education and the changing needs of the labour market in Kenya present an enormous opportunity to identify and foster innovative ways of preparing a workforce that is aligned with the emerging trends, interests and innovations of the employers. It is a general observation that the current century work environment is undergoing continuous transformation in knowledge and skills. Employees must continue in professional development to stay ahead of marketplace trends, keep pace on innovation, and remain relevant to the employers.

This paper intends to discuss the importance of bridging skills gap through development of professional courses. Existing literature minimally discusses curricula and strategies used by employers to train workers who lack initial training for the occupations in which they are employed. The paper aims to add to this discussion by exploring on how the concept of bridging skills through professional development of courses is perceived and implemented Kenya.

2. Skills Gap

The term skill refers to practical proficiencies, competencies and abilities which a graduate of a given course has acquired as a result of undergoing training, either formally or informally. A “skill” can also be described as “the capability to carry out job assigned to a level of competence and this can be built upon through learning” (OECD, 2019). A skills gap is defined as a significant gap between an organization’s current capabilities and the skills it needs to achieve its goals and meet customer demand. It is the point at which an organization may not be able to grow or remain competitive because it cannot fill critical jobs with employees who have the right knowledge, skills, and abilities (Bano & Shanmugam, 2020). According to employers’ perspectives skills gap is when employees or the existing workers possess inadequate skills in meeting the business aspirations of the industry, this is termed internal skill gaps or where new employees come out to be qualified but absolutely, they are not qualified (Olusa, 2019). His definition describes the employees’ scenario in Kenya where the formal education curriculum does not evolve to keep pace with the changes that are gradually and continuously taking place in the business world. There are many careers that did not exist a decade ago that are flourishing now that required new knowledge and skills. There are also already existing careers that requires new modern knowledge and skills to remain relevant in the labour market. The growing skills gap requires a proactive intervention.

In the last decade, skills gap has become an important matter for discussion in construction industry in the whole world. Literature review shows that in the United States skills gap is a national issue that has gained significant attention during recent years. A range of studies from nonprofits and businesses cite the skills gap, and while science, technology, engineering, and math are certainly part of the challenge. It is for governments and investors to understand what impact the skills gap is having and will have on organizations and respective countries. According to a report from [Accenture \(2014\)](#) without intervention in bridging skills gap, the shrinking workforce and unreliable productivity growth rate could lead to a 9% decline in the standard of living in the United States by 2030. To address the challenge of skills gap, a holistic approach of preparing people to go to work with relevant skills and knowledge for jobs that exist now and in the future is critical.

In today's economy which is predominantly driven by knowledge, quality talent and advanced skills have become the most critical competitive advantage for organizations. India one of the upcoming third world countries in industrialization has progressively been moving towards becoming a "knowledge economy" by focusing on advancement of skills relevant to the emerging economic environment. Both the Central and State Governments are trying multiple approaches to skill the workforce to meet the demands of the job market ([Bano & Shanmugam, 2020](#)). Kenya should emulate this trend of skilling her workforce to meet the modern demand of labour market to be able to achieve vision 2030.

In today's fast moving world, employability skill gap is the main problem faced by the both employees and employers. A global study conducted by an alliance of business schools, multinational companies and NGOs, showed that 68% of students and fresh graduates surveyed feel the need to constantly reinvent themselves to stay ahead of the curve. In the Indian technology industry that employs nearly four million people and has revenues of more than \$150 billion, up to three million new positions will be added by 2025. But it would require retraining 60% of the existing workforce ([Ramanathan, 2012](#)). In order to control the unemployment crisis in Kenya, it is necessary for the government and educational stakeholders to provide the training and skill development program to both educated and uneducated citizens. Skill gaps exist in all employment sectors, affecting employees in offices, as well as those working on construction sites or in warehouses or factories.

3. Unemployment in Kenya

One the challenge faced by employees in our modern business environment is loss of job due retrenchment or loss of employment opportunities due to irrelevancy of professional knowledge and skills. Retrenchment in Kenya has become a household name in many organizations as Companies strive to minimize costs and maximize profits. The loss of a job can be devastating to an individual especially if it is not voluntary. It has been established that retrenchment leaves a lot

of job insecurity to the remaining staff bringing their morale down, as they do not know about their fate in future. One possible solution to this challenge and increasing unemployment in Kenya is retraining employees whose previous skills will no longer be required by an employer in new skills (Gatithi, 2007). Bridging skills gap through professional development short term and long term causes should be embraced as a strategy of alleviating employment among the Kenyan citizens.

Another reason for loss of jobs the modern world is the waves of technological innovation that will wipe out old jobs and renders some skills unnecessary. Technological advancement is creating new careers that demand new skills. A critical look at the motor industry shows that the growth in the electric vehicle market may in the near future threaten the car repair industry rendering many Kenyans in the sector jobless. As more drivers switch to cleaner, cheaper, low maintenance electric cars, garages and mechanics dependent on servicing and fixing petrol or diesel cars are set to see their business dwindle. The change from servicing petrol and diesel cars to battery-operated cars, will need different expertise. This is why professional development courses in the field will be necessary to ensure the mechanics remain relevant in the motor industry. This trend is the same in many employment sectors of the Kenyan economy. This justifies the hypothetical assumption of this presentation that reducing the skill gap through continuous professional development courses can lead to professional enhancement, boost efficiency, increase the chances of promotion and employee retention.

4. Professional Development

A critical literature review of the definition of the concept “professional development” shows different perspectives from authors. Some of the common definitions refer to professional development as continuing education, professional learning, in-service training, continuous professional development, career-related continuous learning, professional advancement, and personnel development. In general, Professional development, in a broad sense, refers to the development of a person in his or her professional role. According to Craft (2000) professional development from several angles including “purposes”, “location”, “length”, “methods”, and “levels of impact”. Evidence based on literature review shows that professional development courses should be organized in terms of objectives, content, methods and duration of study and evaluation strategies.

An effective professional development course should be objective and relevant to the employer needs in the labour market. This is illustrated by the findings of a study conducted on a car engine factory in Malaysia that show skill formation is a planned and gradual process put in place to serve as both a career track and a learning track for workers. In the study it was observed that the factory professional development course for the workers ensures that: 1) workers have suffi-

cient mathematical skill, 2) syllabus and training modules are used for training, 3) training is designed to maximize opportunities for practice, and 4) workers' skills are continuously assessed. The study findings can provide important insight to the creators of professional development courses in Kenya (Yılmaz & Sever, 2021).

An effective professional development course should focus on the employer's needs, have a well-developed syllabus with clear training modules and strategies of assessing the workers enhanced competencies. To make the bridging of skills gaps effective through professional development courses there is need to assess the labour market to identify the skills currently sought by employers. The identified needs of the labour should further be integrated in the professional development courses curriculums. Professional development cannot succeed without strong content. As such, for the professional development to be effective and to be contextual teaching, it must be based on curricular and instructional strategies that will enhance students' ability to learn Regular training is well worth the investment to help build up the skills within the business to effectively improve the company's highlights. According to Ejiwale (2019) here five benefits of continuous professional development to employees were identified that should be considered by any potential member of the future workforce. They include:

1) Keeping an employee updated with the changing trends in a job. Employees should endeavor to take courses or seminars to help keep up with changes in their field to remain competitive in their current job. Otherwise, failure to keep up to date is tantamount to the risk of being left behind by your peers.

2) Learning new skills to align an employee with new job opportunities. It is important for an employee to be prepared for the next step in the career progression by proactively participating in professional development courses.

3) Perfecting employee's current job skills. Perfecting job skills makes an employee outstanding and motivated among the co-workers. Furthering education adds employee's credentials and value to the current job.

4) Interacting with others employees in one's field to keep the door open for future opportunities. Employees should be affiliated in trade associations and professional associations related to their field to make networking connections. In addition, participation in valuable training programs will help an employee to have access to more job opportunities and remain updated emerging industry and professional trends.

5) Opening employees mind to new perspectives. It is advisable for employees to focus on seminars, workshops, certificates and self-study books/magazines/ DVD's outside their normal business discipline.

5. Educational Curriculum

A curriculum includes all the student school experiences relating to the improvement of skills and strategies in thinking critically and creatively, solving problems, working collaboratively with others, communicating well, writing

more effectively, reading more analytically, and conducting research to solve problems [Mutale \(2018\)](#). The entire purpose of any curriculum is to prepare the consumers to offer solution to the emerging challenges facing their community and country at large. There is evidence that employers in Kenya find education system, technical training and vocational institutions without the required skills which is a business constraint. Although the size of the skills gap in Kenya is unknown due to lack of detailed research, industry sources have made it clear that they are struggling to fill employment posts. According to a report on Kenya's petroleum sector, the extractives sector is still dominated by foreign expertise in technical, exploration and production skills. In an article published in the Business daily Tuesday, February 27, 2018, the need for continuous professional development in Kenya targeting workers in the formal and informal sectors is critical in the realization of fast economic development.

The issue of graduate unemployment in Africa is a concern among stakeholders. In a survey among experts on 36 African countries about the major challenges youth face in labour markets, 54% found a mismatch of skills between what job seekers have to offer and what employers require to be a major obstacle. They were 41% to identify a general lack of skills among job seekers as a major obstacle ([Kadii, 2012](#)). In Kenya, in-built institutional inhibitions and failed reforms explain the mismatch between the labour market and university programs. This mismatch is attributed to three major causes: inordinate focus on academics rather than employment needs in program development; emphasis on government as the main source of employment; and nonexistent, or inadequate, career advisory services. With the exception Nairobi University, Kenyatta University, Moi University, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, and Egerton University that were established after a considerable assessment of the government's manpower needs, the remaining 72 public and private universities were founded without any assessment of the labor market needs of the national economy ([Munene, 2021](#)).

The marketability of skills is dependent on the curriculum, the mode of training and the skill area. When the education system is responsive to future labour market needs, graduates are more resilient to future changes in the patterns of job creation. In Kenya, some modest reforms and alternative pathways for tertiary education offer a ray of hope. TVET institutions in Kenya have been revitalized through the creation of a market friendly curriculum, provision of modern teaching and learning equipment leading to provision of quality training leading to employment ([Musyimi, 2021](#)).

Most working people don't know how to brand themselves or how to set a career direction. It is important that the future employees should be well versed in both hard and soft skills that are transferable from one position to another one. It will help them to set their career direction ([Freeman, 2013](#)). Therefore, future employees in Kenyan with potentials to be hired need to seek and learn how to upgrade required skills for ongoing success on the job as a proof of workplace readiness credentials. Proactively the government in collaboration with educa-

tion stakeholders must put in place strategies of equipping students with workplace readiness skills through courses that will inherently provide contexts for applied or experiential learning, if well harnessed.

6. Suggested Strategies of Dealing with Skill Gaps

According to Ejiwale (2019) there are ten suggested solutions that can help in minimizing the skills and training gaps for industries and other organization to be successful. The ten suggested solutions to address the causes of skill and training gaps and mismatch between available jobs and potential employees are: 1) Increase STEM education and diversity in STEM industry; 2) Employers should be involved in curriculum development; 3) College graduates should improve their communication skills through extra mural courses; 4) Effective training for new employees upon employment; 5) Learning how to learn skills by students through professional development; 6) Effective marketing of available jobs; 7) Companies to invest in training and development of new and old employers; 8) Effective and efficient estimation of STEM worker demand; 9) Clarity on the skills employers need; 10) Participation in externship and on the job training by educator.

Kenya as a growing economy in the world must focus on developing her human capacity through professional development courses and programs. Employees empowered with relevant job knowledge and skills can be the biggest strength a country can harness in its development. Employers must be willing to invest in initiatives to gear toward overcoming the skills gap by modifying their expectations of graduates and focusing on ways to promote employees learning, acquisition and adaptation of skills.

7. Conclusion

The study through critical literature review revealed that skills gap is a key phenomenon contributing to unemployment. Through the findings of this study the stakeholders in education can consider prioritizing assessment of employers' skills need in order to align professional development curriculum to the emerging need and trends of the labour market. The study has highlighted the importance of continuous professional development courses as key global concern for both developed and developing countries. Some key strategies of addressing skill gaps have also been outlined. The knowledge shared in this paper focuses on Kenya but can provide insight to other countries struggling with unemployment and underdevelopment associated with skills gap in the labour market. The paper recommends the need for further researches especially on the effective strategies of equipping employees in both informal and formal sectors in Kenya with skills relevant to the labour market.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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