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## **Understanding Occupations with Hard to fill Vacancies in the Public Service Sector: The Case of Legislatures.**

### **1. Background and Introduction**

This paper on hard to fill vacancies (HTFVs) and the reasons thereof, is one of four studies undertaken by PSETA in understanding occupations that are hard to fill. The principal focus for this paper is on HTFVs in the legislative sub-sector. The analysis of HTFVs is critical and serves as a key indicator of labour market dynamics and shortages.

The nine (9) legislatures and national parliament are one of the four (4) sub-sectors falling within the PSETA's mandate. It is important to note that PSETA's scope of coverage within the legislative sub-sector is limited to the administrative component (encompassing support staff only). The members of parliament function falls within the scope of the Education, Training and Development Practices (ETDP) SETA. All nine (9) legislatures and national parliament are registered with PSETA and consequently submit their Workplace Skills Plan (WSPs) to the PSETA.

The question of HTFVs in the legislative sub-sector was answered by presenting evidence that emanated from an online survey which was sent to all the legislatures (to which only three responded). Due to the low response rate to the online survey an analysis of scarce skills<sup>1</sup> information located within the 2017-18 WSPs of each legislature, including parliament, was undertaken. Furthermore, a study conducted by PSETA into the capacity building needs in the legislative sub-sector was utilised to validate the findings of the study.

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<sup>1</sup> Scarce Skills refer to occupations in which there are a scarcity of qualified and experienced people, currently or anticipated in the future.

## 2. Literature Review on Hard to fill vacancies

Literature has shown that for organisations to remain competitive, it is imperative for an organisation to know what skills its workforce has, where skills are lacking, and how to bridge any skills gaps. Another contributing factor to HTFVs in most organisations which has been consistent across the literature reviewed is gaps in the recruitment processes - such as mismatch between qualifications to job requirements, and lack of specificity in the job profile.

Literature shows that the lack of available or suitable applicants is the most common reason provided by employers to explain difficulties in filling vacancies (Manpower group, 2016)<sup>2</sup>. Reasons most commonly cited include an applicants' lack of experience, a lack of soft skills and/or a lack of technical competencies required to perform competently in the occupation (Manpower group, 2016). Employers further attribute the difficulty in filling vacancies to a mismatch in remuneration - salary expectations of job applicants often exceed what the employer offers (Manpower group, 2016).

Sutherland (2010) summarily notes that hard to fill vacancies may arise for several different reasons, which can be practically subdivided into two categories; the quantity of applicants and/or the quality of the applicants. Few individuals may apply for vacancies in cases whereby the nature of the job (such as wages, conditions of employment, and/or location of the firm) does not suit the demands of the labour market (Sutherland, 2010). Hard to fill vacancies may arise for quality-related reasons; that is when the applicants have deficiencies in related experience and/or qualifications (Sutherland, 2010).

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<sup>2</sup> MANPOWER Group (2016). Talent Shortages. [http://www.manpowergroup.com/wps/wcm/connect/2d7acf6d-2814-489a-bd7f-ec5c98d67481/2013\\_Talent\\_Shortage\\_Survey\\_Results\\_US\\_high%2Bres.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=2d7acf6d-2814-489a-bd7f-ec5c98d67481](http://www.manpowergroup.com/wps/wcm/connect/2d7acf6d-2814-489a-bd7f-ec5c98d67481/2013_Talent_Shortage_Survey_Results_US_high%2Bres.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=2d7acf6d-2814-489a-bd7f-ec5c98d67481)

Sutherland (2010)<sup>3</sup> found that the presence of hard to fill vacancies in organisations negatively impacts the performance and production of the workplace. The extent of this impact of course depends upon the number of vacancies, the type of occupations with those vacancies and the duration of the vacancy.

The labour market dynamics in South Africa is mainly characterized by the structural mismatch between labour demand and supply which normally favours highly skilled workers rather than the low and semi-skilled workers – which is the majority of the South African workforce (Reddy, Borhat, Powell, Visser, & Arends, 2016)<sup>4</sup>. The structural changes in the economy such as the shift towards a services economy which is highly dependent on highly skilled and semi-skilled workers exacerbates the skills shortages in the country (Rasool & Botha, 2011).

The legislative sub-sector in South Africa has gone through development and restructuring since 1994. The legislative sub-sector is not exempted from the occupational movements with most legislatures having vacancies at any point in time as individual's continually change occupations voluntarily or otherwise. When the vacancies arise, the organisations have to fill them to ensure continuity in their production, the literature and engagement with the employers has shown that the process of filling some vacancies is not always an easy one as some organisations face difficulties in filling in some vacancies, which in turn affect the time taken to fill the vacancies.

The synopsis of the literature shows that the reasons for a vacancy to be deemed hard to fill can be complex and rests upon a number of factors such as but not limited to the nature of the occupation, the recruitment strategy of the employer, the size and status of the employer.

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<sup>3</sup> Sutherland, J. (2010). Skills Gaps and Hard to Fill Vacancies at Establishments in Scotland. Centre for Public Policy for Regions University of Glasgow.

<sup>4</sup> Reddy, V., Borhat, H., Powell, M., Visser, M and Arends, A., (2016) Skills Supply and Demand in South Africa, LMIP Publication, Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria.

### **3. Occupations with Hard to Fill Vacancies**

Table one below presents the vacancies that the legislative sub-sector identified as hard to fill. This HTVFs were found to be common across the sub-sector.

Table 1: Occupations with Hard to fill vacancies in the legislative sub-sector

<b>Occupations with Hard to Fill Vacancies in the Legislative Sub-Sector<sup>5</sup></b>	
1. Risk, Monitoring and Evaluation Manager	10. Internal Auditor
2. Sign Language Interpreter	11. Finance Manager
3. Committee Researchers	12. Computer systems engineer
4. Interpreters	13. Senior Government Manager
5. Information Services Manager	14. Forensic Accountant/Investigating Accountant
6. Diversity and Gender Practitioner	15. Programme or Project Manager/Project Director
7. Policy Analyst	16. Supply Chain Practitioner/Supply Chain Administrator Forensic Accountant/Investigating Accountant
8. Economist/Economic Advisor/Financial Economist	17. ICT Systems Analyst/Specialist/System Designer
9. Personnel / Human Resource Manager/Employee Relations Manager/Transition Manager	

<sup>5</sup> These HTFVs emanated from the three methods used for the study and some of them were indicated as HTFVs by numerous legislatures.

Research conducted by Pillay and Paruk (2017)<sup>6</sup> in Parliament and provincial legislatures indicated that the sub-sector has deficits in the following key skills and occupations:

- Legal skills for Committee support;
- Financial management skills;
- Research support for Parliamentary Committees;
- Automation – IT skills to develop and implement automation processes; and
- Other skills deficits that were recognised included the following: project management; government communications; wellness; monitoring and evaluation; parliamentary proceedings; human resources management; corporate governance; legislative drafting.

The results from the study by Pillay and Paruk (2017) are in agreement with the data displayed in table one above in terms of occupations that are HTFVs.

#### **4. Reasons for Hard to fill vacancies**

- A number of reasons stemmed from the data analysis that explains why some occupations were deemed hard to fill by some legislatures. The reasons are complex and interrelated.

##### **4.1. Relative scarcity due to replacement demand**

- The legislatures constantly have to fill vacancies due to a rapidly ageing workforce (the need to replace the skills of retiring staff). Analysis of legislative sectoral vacancies conducted by Pillay and Paruk (2017) point to a rapidly ageing workforce and few systematic efforts to transfer institutional memory, thus leading to an increasing difficulty of appropriate skills in the sub-sector.

##### **4.2. Absolute scarcity due to a technological changes**

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<sup>6</sup> Pillay and Paruk (2017). Capacity Building Needs For Administrative and Support Personnel in the Legislative Sector, a research report prepared for Public Service SETA. Wits School of Governance.

- Technological changes in the world of work also have an intense impact on the nature, quality and combination of occupations that the sub-sector requires. When the labour force cannot meet this requirement, it presents the employers with difficulties in filling in some of their vacancies. Somlomo<sup>7</sup> (2017) noted that continuous learning is an absolute must in the legislative sub-sector, given the changes that are taking place in the world of work as a result of technological advancement and the development of “artificial intelligence”, this will incline recruiters to look for these skills from the candidates when recruiting.

#### **4.3. Due to lack of sufficient and/or appropriate experience**

- The sub-sector has difficulty filling job vacancies because there are insufficient jobseekers with the required skills/experience. There is a need for increased skill specialization in the legislatures due to the need by customers (MPs and MPLs in this case) to have ready access to subject matter experts and specialist skills. This requirement of appropriate skills and experience at times presents the employers (legislatures) with difficulties in getting the required candidates from the external labour market. Pillay and Paruk (2017) noted that skills for the legislative sub-sector often involve development beyond formal qualifications, they require top-up training by legislative institutions along with informal training and development methods such as coaching, mentoring, job shadowing, job rotation, etc.

#### **4.4. Due to remuneration and employment conditions**

- Sometimes recruitment difficulties for some occupations are experienced whereby there are enough job seekers with the required skills but they are unwilling to take up the work on offer, that is the sub-sector is unable to attract the skills needed (due to salaries not being competitive, undesirable working conditions, issues linked to status, stereotypes about public service, etc). Sorour’s<sup>8</sup> (2013) study of the South African legislative sub-sector shows that there was a difference of as much as 80% in pay levels for the same job level/grade across legislatures. As a result the study recommended a “harmonisation solution” requiring the development of a new pay scale aligned

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<sup>7</sup> Somlomo (2017). <http://www.sals.gov.za/>

<sup>8</sup> Sorour, D (2013), Final Report on A study to determine processes, amount of change involved and cost implications for the harmonization (creating common standards in the conditions of service) within the South African legislative Sector, Prepared for Job Mokgoro Consulting, Johannesburg.

with market practice and providing the 'best fit' across pay scales currently being applied. The differences in remuneration scales across legislatures places 'rural' provinces at a disadvantage in attracting the talent they want due to lower remuneration packages in these provinces.

#### **4.5. Due to the location of job/post (Location and willingness to relocate)**

This study also found that the location of a job impacts the persistence of a vacant position. At an individual level, the labour force make career choices based on their personal preferences and motivation. They may be influenced by wages, career opportunities, working conditions and lifestyle choices.

#### **4.6. Relative scarcity due to equity considerations**

- Some vacancies were considered hard to fill by some legislatures because the available candidates did not meet the employment equity targets of the employers. This employment equity considerations at times delays the time taken to fill some vacancies.

#### **4.7. New and emerging occupation**

- Some of the vacancies were deemed hard to fill by the legislatures due to some occupations being new and emerging at an organisational level.

### **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The focus of this study was to analyse, and understand the hard to fill vacancies and the reasons thereof in the legislative sub-sector of South Africa. This question was explored by analysing data collected through an online survey with the legislatures, WSP information from the legislatures and other research studies. Emanating from the research is that the existence of HTFVs is attributable to numerous interrelated factors like the nature of the occupation, the nature of the skills required in the occupation, the recruitment strategy of the employer, the nature of contract offered, the geographical location of the vacancy, and new and emerging occupation at an org level. The skills requirements of the legislatures are increasingly focused on sub-sector specific skills from their workforce which leads to prolonging the recruitment processes.

The following recommendations are suggested as a way of addressing HTFVs;

- Legislatures may consider the review of job specifications to ensure that the remuneration and conditions of employment are attractive competitive, and uniform across all the legislatures, particularly in occupations that are in demand.
- The success of organisations relatively hinges on attracting, recruiting and managing talent. Therefore a good strategy for training and development, talent management, and succession planning are critical. This talks to effective human resource planning in the legislatures.
- Internal learning, mentoring and coaching in the legislatures becomes one of the many important strategies of dealing with the replacement demand emanating from the ageing workforce.



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**Research conducted by the Skills Planning and Research department of the Public Service SETA.**

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