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Understanding Occupations with Hard to fill Vacancies in the Public Service Sector: The Case of PSETA Public Entities

This article is one of four articles on hard to fill vacancies in the public service sector and presents the findings of hard to fill vacancies in the case of public entities that submit their Workplace Skills Plan (WSP) to the Public Service Sector Education and Training Authority (PSETA). The data for this study was collected through an online survey and qualitative interviews which PSETA held with key informants. From the eight public entities that submitted their WSPs to PSETA in the 2017-18 financial year, a total of six public entities participated in the study. The findings in this paper emanate from the information received from the following PSETA public entities:

- *Gauteng Partnership Fund (GPF)*
- *National Heritage Council (NHC)*
- *Special Investigative Unit (SIU)*
- *South African Revenue Services (SARS)*
- *National Consumer Commission (NCC)*
- *National Library of South Africa (NLSA)*

The study presents the vacancies which the key informants deemed hard to fill for their respective entities and the reasons why these vacancies were deemed hard to fill. Participants were further asked about the impact HTFVs have on their organisations and what steps they are taking to address them.

Hard to fill vacancies in this study are defined as vacancies or occupations that took longer than 6 months for the employer to find a suitably qualified and experienced candidate.

Background and Context

Labour market dynamics are complex and constantly changing with most employers finding themselves having to fill vacancies at some point in time. In filling a vacancy that may arise, an organisation may face challenges and difficulties along the way which may affect the length of time vacancies remain vacant. This might lead to some vacancies being deemed hard to fill (of course this is dependent on the underlying reasons for the vacancy to be deemed hard to fill). The underlying reasons why vacancies are hard to fill may vary per organisation depending upon numerous factors. In the case of public entities it is vital to consider the point made by Sutherland (2010)¹ that the bigger the organisation (in establishment size), the more likely it is to experience difficulties in filling vacancies compared to smaller entities.

Most of the public entities that were part of this study were medium-sized and

large entities in terms of their staff establishment, with the exception of the NHC. Therefore, it is expected that a high hard to fill vacancy rate persists within the public entities that participated in this study.

The National Consumer Commission reported their staff establishment to be 79 employees. The National Library of South Africa reported that they have a staff establishment of 200 employees. The staff establishment estimated by the Special Investigative Unit (SIU) at the time of data collection was 500 staff members. This background may partly be explanatory in why some entities experience more hard to fill vacancies in their establishments compared to others.

¹ Skills Gaps and Hard to Fill Vacancies at Establishments in Scotland. Centre for Public Policy for Regions University of Glasgow.

Vacancies Employers are Having Difficulty Filling

Table 1: Reported HTFVs at NLSA²

Table one below presents the vacancies that NLSA identified as HTFVs in their organisation and the reasons thereof. Due to the size and mandate of the NLSA only four vacancies were mentioned as hard to fill.

HTFVs	Cited Reasons for Difficulty In Filling The Vacancies
Bookbinders	Unavailability of specific skills which are required on the job. The external labour market is small.
Conservators	The specificity of job requirements -the job comprises paper conservation which is generally done by chemical engineers, since there is chemical engineering involved in the conservation of paper materials. The NLSA's less competitive remuneration offering makes it hard for the organisation to attract chemical engineers as chemical engineers are generally expensive to recruit and retain. Even when the NLSA is able to recruit a candidate with some form of a chemical engineering qualification, the issue of specialisation in paper conservation persists. Overall, there are few individuals in the labour market with this skill and speciality..
Digitiser (Digitisation)	The digitisation service is a new function which involves creating digital records of materials (especially scarce materials) for the reasons of both preservation and access. The remuneration structure and special nature of the job contribute to the occupation being hard to fill when vacant
Indexer/editor	The special nature of the job and the experience required: the job requires individuals with editing in library and information services (so these individuals need to be librarians first). The job requires someone with excellent language skills, there are few libraries who need editors, and consequently there is scarcity of editors in the external labour market. <i>"These people are specialised, people with these skills do not want to work normal business hours, they mostly want to freelance, consult or work from home and they usually want to be hired as independent contractors/ consultants"</i> . The combination of skills which are required in this job makes the vacancy a hard to fill vacancy.

² Mandate: to build up a complete collection of published documents emanating from or relating to South Africa.

Table 2: Reported HTFVs at the SIU³

Table two below presents the vacancies that the SIU identified as HTFVs in their organisation and the reasons thereof. The SIU occupations are specialized in nature with four occupations below being related to forensic investigation.

HTFV	Cited Reasons for Difficulty In Filling The Vacancies
ICT Enterprise Architect Specialist	High turnover due to competitive salaries and high demand in the labour market.
ICT Risk & Governance Specialist	Required skill is very hard to find in the labour market, the organisation is as a result redefining the requirements and content to realign to business needs.
Business Systems Manager	There is high demand in the external labour market for this occupation, and the less attractive pay and incentives of the organisation leads to high turnover rates in this occupation.
Forensic Accountants (Senior)	The occupation is scarce in the external labour market, there are highly competitive salaries, and the combination of qualifications (and skills) required for this occupation makes it hard to fill.
Forensic Lawyers	Lack of the technical competencies or “hard” skills required for the occupation, especially in the operational environment of SIU.
Cyber Forensic Examiner	High turnover due to competitive salaries and high demand in the labour market there is competition from organisations like SARS, FICA ⁴ , and Banks.
Forensic Data Analytics	High turnover due to competitive salaries and high demand in the market.
CFO	High salary demands and high turnover rates. Internal structural constraints as a result the organisational restructuring, redefining and re-profiling of the position including salary grading.
Communication Manager	The position is unstable since there has not been a head in the department (the head of stakeholder Communications). The

³Mandated to investigate fraud, corruption and maladministration, and to institute civil litigation to recover losses suffered by the state.

⁴ Financial Intelligence Centre Act

	organisation has stringent requirements such as the security clearance and integrity checks.
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Table 3: Reported HTFVs at NHC⁵

Table three below presents the vacancies that NHC identified as HTFVs in their organisation and the reasons thereof. The NHC is a small-sized organisation and as a result only three occupations were identified as hard to fill.

HTFVs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project manager: Liberation Heritage Route (NHC) • General Manager (Core Business) (NHC) • Supply Chain manager (NHC)
Cited reasons	The vacancies had to be frozen since the organisation is going through an Organisational Design exercise. Lack of heritage skills and understanding.

Table 2: Reported HTFVs at SARS⁶

Table four below presents the vacancies that SARS identified as HTFVs in their organisation and the reasons thereof. SARS's large staff establishment and speciality of their functions is reflected by diverse occupations that have been identified as hard to fill.

HTFVs	Cited Reasons for Difficulty In Filling The Vacancies	Re-advertised how many times?
Executive: Customs Port	This is a strategic position in SARS with a new Customs and Excise operating model. No immediate skills pipeline is available and this is not a common skill available in the labour market.	Twice

⁵ responsible for the preservation of the country's heritage through focusing on Policy development, public awareness and education, knowledge production in heritage subjects and funding heritage as socio-economic resource projects.

⁶ Mandated to collect all revenues due, ensure optimal compliance with tax and customs legislation and provide a customs service that will optimise revenue collection, protect our borders and facilitate legitimate trade.

HTFVs	Cited Reasons for Difficulty In Filling The Vacancies	Re-advertised how many times?
Executive: Customs Audit (Investigative)	Strategic position in the new Customs and Excise operating model. No immediate skills pipeline available and requirement was to establish new audit function in Customs and Excise specialised discipline.	Twice
Executive: Office Support	Awaited the appointment of the new Chief of Enforcement.	Twice
Executive: Financial Own Accounts	Preferred candidate did not meet employment equity (EE) requirements.	3 times
Executive: Revenue Planning	No successful candidate to-date. Position also awaiting appointment of new Chief of Finance (CFO).	Twice
Executive: Quality Management	No available EE candidates internally to that minimum requirements. Thus vacancy is to be advertised externally..	Twice
Executive: Fraud Investigations	Awaited the appointment of the Group Executive position (as this position reports to the Executive).	Twice
Senior Manager: Programme Management	Initially this position was reviewed in terms of level, grade and content. This has now been finalised and recruitment will commence.	Twice
Senior Manager: Engineering Services	No candidate was found that met the minimum requirements as last round of interviews did not produce a suitable candidate, especially against strict EE requirements.	5 times (including to recruitment agencies)
Manager: Business Support	Dispute with regard to funding availability of position between Line Management and HR and Finance divisions since the	3 times (including recruitment agencies)

HTFVs	Cited Reasons for Difficulty In Filling The Vacancies	Re-advertised how many times?
	position existed on the SARS old Operating Model.	
Agent: Service Level 2	Filling of this post was put on hold for possible re-allocation of funds for other more priority positions.	Twice
Specialist: Business Architecture	No candidate was found that met the minimum requirements as last round of interviews did not produce a suitable candidate, especially against strict EE requirements.	4 times
Manager: Compliance Risk	Initial campaign did not find a suitable candidate in terms of meeting the minimum requirements of the job. After re-advertisement, two candidates were offered the position, which was however declined. The next possible candidate is in the process of appointment.	3 times (including Agencies)
Manager: Branch Operations	The funds for this position were re-allocated via the Vacancy Governance Process for more urgent requirements at another branch or area.	4 times (including Agencies)
Manager: Planning	The initial candidate did not meet EE requirements and the reduction of the EE requirement was not approved. The second candidate met EE requirements, but could not commence duty due to extended sick leave and later declined offer. The Commissioner has recently approved reduction of EE requirements for this position.	4 times

HTFVs	Cited Reasons for Difficulty In Filling The Vacancies	Re-advertised how many times?
Senior Manager: Case Selection-Custom & Excise	New function in Customs and Excise, no internal skills pipeline available.	3 times
Senior Manager: Customs Portfolio	Initial position was part of the SARS new Customs & Excise Operating Model roll-out, however it was realised that it may not be necessary to fill the vacancy in terms of the new structure.	3 times
Manager: Audit	Position was unfunded but kept organisational structure intact, now to be used as capacity required due to new Auditor Graduates being appointed.	Twice
Manager: Investigations	Correct EE availability.	Twice
Senior Manager: Legal & Domestic Tax	Correct EE availability.	3 times
Manager: Technology Security	The position was initially advertised in the Digital and Technology environment but no suitable candidate found. It has been placed on hold till the finalisation of the organisation structure.	3 times
Functional Specialist: Analysis	Additional BEPS ⁷ /HNWI ⁸ specialised positions created and as this is a newly specialised field, skills talent pipeline is not readily available which impacts turnaround times.	Twice
Functional Specialist: Analysis	Additional BEPS/HNWI specialised positions created and as this is a newly specialised field talent pipeline nor readily available which impacts turnaround times.	Twice

⁷ Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (Initiative that seeks to close gaps in international taxation)

⁸ High-Net-Worth Individual

HTFVs	Cited Reasons for Difficulty In Filling The Vacancies	Re-advertised how many times?
Operational Specialist: Internal Audit	The successful candidate withdrew shortly before commencement date due other personal reasons/preferences.	Twice
Consultant: Integrity	Lack of skill and talent pipeline within SARS in terms of correct EE availability for gender representation on management.	Twice
Investigator: Enforcement	Lack of skill and talent pipeline within SARS in terms of correct EE availability for gender representation at management level.	Twice
Operational Manager: Client Analysis	Lack of skill and talent pipeline within SARS, need to consider going external.	Twice
Skipper	New job with no pipeline available and requires specialised training.	Twice
Deck Hand	New job with no pipeline available and requires specialised training.	Twice
Operational Manager: Customs	The vacancy has been placed on hold awaiting the final roll-out of the Customs and Excise Operating Model. Funds will then be re-allocated to this position.	Twice
Inspector: Customs Border Control Unit	The vacancy has been placed on hold awaiting the final roll-out of the Customs and Excise Operating Model. Funds will then be re-allocated to this position.	Twice
Operational Manager: Debt Management	Initially EE requirements were not met and candidate requested revised offer.	Twice
Operational Specialist: Facilities Tech. Services.	Correct EE appointment, additional motivation to appoint Coloured Male.	Twice
Officer: Physical Security Level 1	Re-arrangement of function to new division	Once

Table 3: Reported HTFVs at GPF⁹

Table five below presents the vacancies that GPF identified as HTFVs in their organisation and the reasons thereof.

HTFVs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personnel / Human Resource Manager/Employee Relations Manager/Transition Manager. • Independent Advisor to the CEO
Cited reasons	Due to remuneration and employment conditions

- In the case of the NHC, the organisation is going through a reengineering process and thus it was a challenge for them to provide reliable information on their HTFVs. The key informant noted that in the current year they have not advertised any vacancies as a result. It is envisaged that with the expansion of the organisation there is likelihood of the emergence of HTFVs in the organisation.
- The NCC¹⁰ noted no difficulties in filling their vacancies, the organisation is able to attract the talent they need when they need it. *“Consumer protection act is new in the market and there are no qualifications in this regard” (KII).*

Generally Cited Reasons for Difficulty in Filling Vacancies

A number of factors were cited by the key informants as contributory to their difficulties in attracting the required talent when needed.

The SIU noted that the stringent requirements such as the security clearance and integrity checks which candidates need to undergo as part of the recruitment process, poses a challenge at times, leaving the organisations with difficulties in filling

⁹ Mandate: to serve as the financing, development and implementing agent for integrated, sustainable human settlement developments within the Gauteng City Region.

¹⁰ Responsible for registering and assessing consumer complaints, investigating alleged misconducts by businesses and represents consumers in the Consumer Tribunal.

vacancies within the minimal time required.

In most cases the organisation's minimum qualification requirements which is commonly a three-year qualification and the special competencies within the field of forensic investigations. The challenge at times is that the candidates possess short-course qualifications when the advert requires a three year qualification.

If the salary package offered in the organisation is less competitive compared to the private sector, this presents the organisation with challenges of being outcompeted by the private sector. The excerpt quoted verbatim below came out of the engagement with one of the key informants;

“The public service sector becomes a higher learning institution for the private sector” (KII).

Changes within key leadership positions was noted by the SIU as one of the reasons that contributes to the difficulty in filling some of the vacancies in organisations. *“The change in*

leadership often affect the time taken to fill in the positions” (KII). This is because some positions have to be sanctioned by the directors first. *“Some positions are delayed by the directors, a number of positions were placed on hold by the directors”*

The combination of qualifications and/or experience and unique competencies required to fill some vacancies often presents organisations with difficulties in filling in some vacancies.

Though not reflected by all the organisations, the transformation and employment equity requirements may have a huge impact on the time taken to fill in some vacancies.

Implications

The workforce is the backbone of most organisations and one of the most significant factors to the success and performance of organisations, as a result ensuring that organisations have the right talent when they need it becomes one of the prerequisite to their success. The literature however has shown that there are a number of vacancies which organisations find difficulties in filling. When that happens, it will undoubtedly impacts upon the productivity of organisations. For this

study the employers were asked about the impact the HTFVs have on their organisations.

Some of the mentioned implications by the key informants summarily included the following:

- The organisations are forced to operate with reduced resources.
- The HTFVs means instability in some strategic, non-strategic and operational occupations and organisational divisions/units.
- The HTFVs negatively impacts upon the organisational efficiency.
- May lead to the lack of strategic direction in the organisation.
- Disturbs the timelines, productivity, and achievement of strategic goals of the organisation and ultimately service delivery.
- Some HTFVs identified by SARS impact upon revenue generation.

Overcoming the Talent Shortages

Respondents were asked about the steps they are taking to address the difficulties they face in filling vacancies. A number of organisations adopt

various strategies in overcoming hard to fill vacancies in their organisations.

Some employers have opted for outsourcing the recruitment functions to recruitment agencies to deal with the backlog that may arise as a result of not filling some vacancies.

In order to address the HTFVs in some occupations other employers appointed people who lacked the job skills currently but had the potential to develop them and relied on training them from within the organisation. For the NLSA since their salary structure is not competitive enough to attract the talent they need, they opted to hire people with technical matric and N6 chemical with the intention of allowing these employees to learn on the job.

“The indexer positions need skills transfer and the people with the skills are already out on retirement” (KII, NLSA).

General Findings/Notes

SARS noted that the vacancies in the organisation generally emerge as a result of two reasons, (I) attrition (about 60 people are said to leave SARS monthly), (ii) other vacancies emerge from the creation of new position (these

positions are created by abolishing an old position and creating new ones).

A common practice within the public service sector is the prolonged acting arrangements put in place when a vacancy arises. This does not necessarily result in a vacancy being hard to fill but rather results in a persistent vacant position. The distinguishing factor in such a case is that active recruitment for a suitable candidate does take place.

The number of re-advertisements of vacancies presented may relatively be an indication of difficulty in filling those vacancies by the organisations. With SARS there are a number of vacancies that have been re-advertised by the organisation to try and recruit the suitable candidate for their vacancies.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper was aimed at exploring the vacancies the employers have difficulties in filling together with the main reasons why employers have difficulties filling their HTFVs.

The evidence presented in this paper has shown that despite the persistent high levels of unemployment¹¹ in the country, organisations still report that

they have difficulties to find the talent they are looking for to fill some of their vacancies and as a result take longer to fill some of their job vacancies. The data presented by this paper has shown that the HTFVs which are experienced by the organisations differ greatly per organisation and the reasons are multifaceted.

What is clear from the data is that whilst some reasons for vacancies to be hard to fill are skills-related (thus reflecting shortage on the external labour market), some reasons are non-skills related that are sometimes complex in nature and find their existence in the internal processes of the individual organisations.

The engagement with respondents gave rise to a number of recommendations, some of the recommendations are thus;

- The organisations need to review their choice of recruitment channels to ensure that the most appropriate methods are being utilised to reach potential candidates.

¹¹ Statistics South Africa (2017). Quarterly Labour Force survey (Q3). Cited at

<http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02113rdQuarter2017.pdf>

- The job advert needs to be as clear as possible and friendly to the labour market.
- The job offers and packages need to be realistic to ensure that the people who meet the criteria will apply and not be discouraged by the job offer and its incentives.
- The nature of the employment contract offered by organisations is influential on who will apply for the vacancy, the better the nature and length of contract the more likely the organisation will attract suitable candidates.
- Proper human resource planning and management mechanisms at organisational level is critical. These may contribute in reducing the number of vacancies that exist through succession planning, retention and efficient replacement demand processes.

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