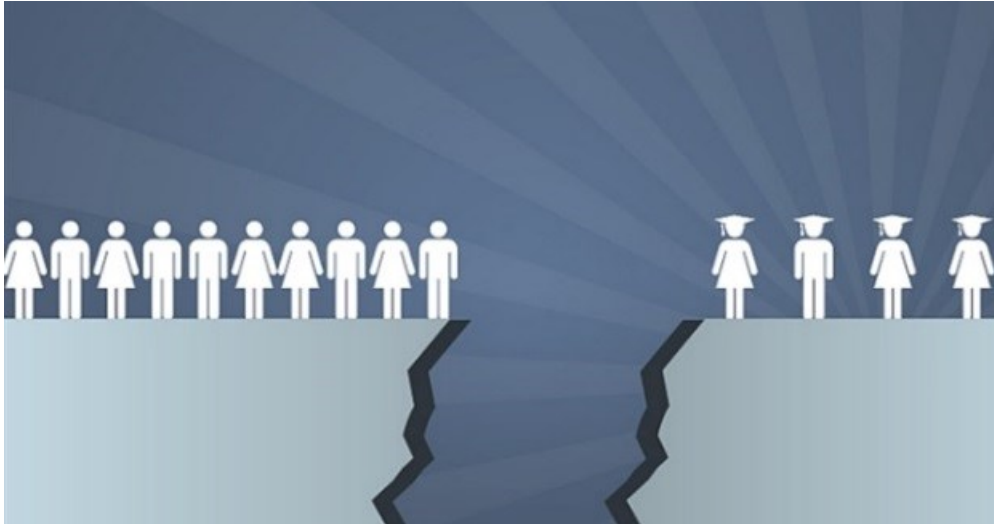


How to bridge the education-workplace gap

By [Rashied Small](#) and [Liez Leleu](#)

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Many graduates approach the "new chapter in their career" with enthusiasm as trainees/clerks in the accountancy profession, but are often shocked when they encounter the reality and challenges on applying their "knowledge" in practice.



These experiences of graduates are a clear indication of the "education-workplace" gap which is not unique to the accountancy profession but is becoming a global concern with numerous questions being raised by industry captains about the value of tertiary education.

The reasons for the gap

The "education-workplace" expectation gap may be attributed, firstly, to the understanding of the workplace requirements by tertiary education leaders. Secondly, the disagreement on the responsibilities of education institutions and industry for the training and development of the learners; and thirdly, the extended process of changing academic programmes, which may not accommodate the rapidly changing requirements of the workplace.

Other causes include:

- The mismatch of the academic qualification and the workplace requirement;
- The focus of the academic learning process on subject content and technical knowledge;
- The silo approach to knowledge development and assessment;
- The lack of exposure to the application of technology in the learning process; and
- The lack of the development of critical skills required for the application of knowledge in a changing business and economic environments.

Current approach

The short-term solution currently being implemented to address the gap in South Africa is to provide "work-readiness programmes". However, these programmes focus on developing the pervasive and inter-personal skills to facilitate the transition into the working environment.

The long-term solution is to review the education and training as a continuum with a focus on an integrated approach that addresses the competence requirements of executing the critical work functions at the expected levels of proficiency.

This requires a paradigm shift in the education environment with a change from the traditional teaching and learning system to competency-based education system (integration of technical knowledge and practical skills).

Changing skills requirement

The 21st century is abuzz with the concepts of “technology and connectivity” as the drivers of progress and development. The accountancy profession is no exception. Long gone are the days of “pencil pushers and paper users” because technology such as accounting and financial reporting packages have changed the skills sets required from human resources.

Technology has taken over the processing function (data conversion to financial information) as well as financial information analysis through artificial intelligence and “big data”.

Furthermore, the shift in emphasis of financial reporting towards principle based reporting about the economic phenomenon of business transactions rather than rules based coupled with the demands for Integrated Reporting have placed even greater a premium on the cognitive skills of the professional in the accountancy profession.

A consolidation of the aforementioned and, more importantly, for the relevance and survival of the professionals in the accountancy profession, it is an unequivocal requirement for changes to take place in the education and training.

Way forward

To close the gap, educational leaders and captains of industry must work in a collaborative manner to develop and implement the following strategies:

- focus on making academic qualification relevant in the market and the graduates employable,
- re-curriculate the academic programmes by aligning them with the workplace skill requirements;
- incorporate the development of competencies (technical knowledge, practical skills and pervasive skills) into the curricula;
- align the teaching and learning strategies with the outcomes of the revised curricula by focusing on competency-based education systems;
- develop the critical skills such as reading, critical thinking and writing into the teaching and learning process; and
- review the assessment strategies to evaluate the competencies of the learners.

Does this mean that the current education and training systems should be discarded – the answer is a definite “**no**”, but they should be reviewed and adapted to meet the changing demands of the business environment and workplace expectations? Everyone claims that accounting and the related subjects are practical in nature, yet it is taught in a technical

and theoretical manner often ignoring developing the skills required to apply it in the world of work.

It is not a question of reducing the technical knowledge which is often blamed for information overload by academics, but focussing on the skills required to facilitate the process of engaging with the volumes of information.

Partnership of collective sharing

For education and training to be a continuum it is necessary for educational institutions and industry to form a partnership of collective sharing of responsibilities through a co-operative manner pursuing an integrated mandate.

The development of employable and competent professionals is not only key to the accountancy profession, but it is critical in addressing the risks such as fraud and corruption, which are depriving business and the economy of the ethical responsibilities of ensuring sustainability and growth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rashied Small, is an Education, Training and Membership Executive for the South African Institute of Professional Accountants, and Liezl Leleu is a professional accountant (SA).

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