

# Addressing the skills shortage in IT

By [Keith Newnham](#)

23 Apr 2014

Don't let the number of IT graduates fool you; there is still a lack of technical skills in the industry. Here's what we need to do about it.



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More people are choosing to pursue careers in IT than ever before. Yet, paradoxically, the pool of quality IT engineers is shrinking. There is a shortage of real-world IT skills and in-depth technical knowledge. The few engineers that we do have have the potential to hold the whole industry at ransom.

While the quality of maths and science education is undoubtedly of concern, we need also to examine the ways in which private tertiary institutions and corporations are failing to equip young people for careers in the ICT sector.

There are training interventions that offer excellent value, but many are falling well short in terms of addressing the needs of learners and the wider industry. They have sprung up to fulfil a very immediate and pressing need, but, as a result, act more as a temporary fix to the problem rather than a long-term solution. A six-week, or even six month, ICT certification course is simply not enough: the students who attend such programmes do not receive the level of technical or practical knowledge they need to find and sustain a job in IT.

## High expectations

These young people go out into the jobs world with high expectations of securing a stepping stone into a rewarding career, but become disillusioned and lose any passion they might have had for technology when this does not come to pass.

Their disillusionment is further exacerbated by weak internships that turn out to be nothing more than glorified "gopher" roles. One upsetting trend is the number of "professional interns" - young people who bounce around from low-paid

internship to internship without ever receiving the on-the-job experience they need to get their foot in the door of their chosen career.

These quick-fix qualifications and exploitative internships hurt the industry more than they help it.

The government certainly has a role to play. Increasing education standards and shutting down unscrupulous "education initiatives" that are nothing more than diploma mills must be made a priority. Further, they can make it more attractive for private organisations to get involved.

However, addressing the skills shortage should, ultimately, be a community effort. The onus is on those in the IT sector to prepare youths adequately for productive and successful careers in the industry.

Companies should mould potential IT graduates from the ground up. All too often, learners who want a "career in IT" have no real level of understanding of what it entails, nor of the different options within the IT sector. The industry needs to create awareness around the disciplines they can specialise in: virtualisation, storage, networking, the cloud and so much more. It needs to instil a drive in these young people that will inspire them and give them the passion and knowledge they need to make storage - or any other branch of IT - their career.

Companies need to re-examine their learnerships and training programmes, and assess whether they are giving young people the tools they really need to be successful. Continuing to use interns as cheap labour rather than devoting resources to training them properly will result in long-term damage to the quality of South Africa's IT professionals.

It's time to stop paying lip service to the idea of youth training. There needs to be a willingness in the industry to address the shortcomings of its skills development programmes honestly and make the necessary changes.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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