

Water Sector Skills Within a COVID-19 Context



South Africa's lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, whilst necessary, has had a devastating effect on the economy and has left many South Africans without formal or informal means to earn an income. The COVID-19 pandemic and its socio-economic consequences require EWSETA to assess skills required to respond to the challenges, as well as empower the sector to exploit opportunities which may have arisen.

The EWSETA virtual water skills COVID-19 Workshop held on 6 August 2020, in partnership with the Department of Human Settlements, Water and Sanitation (DWS), the Water Research Commission (WRC), and the Water Institute of Southern Africa (WISA), sought to unpack the consequences of COVID-19 on the water sector.

The 100 workshop attendees from national and provincial departments, large, medium and small employers in the sector, professional bodies and industry associations, private and public skills development providers, researchers, and non-governmental organisations, participated in discussions facilitated by six individuals from partner organisations with knowledge of the water and sanitation sector.

Whilst the pandemic appears to have not had significant impact on the water and sanitation sector yet, the sector is holding its breath unsure about what the future will hold. This is reflected in not filling vacancies and in some instances keeping staff, but lowering salaries instead of retrenchments. Whilst SMMEs had been able to remain afloat in the short term, most SMME respondents alluded to liquidations and retrenchments, especially if they were not able to tap into the emerging opportunities.

Digital skills, ranging from the complete digitalisation of processes to basic computer literacy, emerged as key skills requirements in the sector. Many agreed that these skills requirements should be approached through short courses delivered in a timely and appropriate manner.

Upskilling within the context of COVID-19 has identified three key challenges: facilitators who themselves are not digitally savvy or accepting of the new reality; access to digital learning platforms is highly unequal and often not of good quality (including access to devices, connectivity, computer literacy); and the public frameworks for digital learning are not in place in the water and sanitation sector to ensure quality control and guidance.

From the range of responses, it was clear that those in senior managerial positions required immediate upskilling to manage the rapidly changing environment and circumstances. This includes risk and disaster management, leadership and human resources management, as well as agile project management. Middle and lower level staff require digital upskilling to manage the shifts in processes.

It should also be noted that respondents generally felt that digital literacy and leaderships skills gaps existed prior to the pandemic, but had come into sharp focus due to the crisis.

Whereas the workshop focused on skills within a COVID-19 context, key messages that emerged were the importance of collaboration between sector stakeholders, driving available opportunities and addressing sector skills development challenges in a coordinated manner.

“Digital literacy and leaderships skills gaps existed prior to the pandemic, but had come into sharp focus due to the crisis.”



The workshop questionnaire was based on DHET's SETA employers interview template for the Sector Skills Plan - but adjusted to factor in COVID-19 as a specific change driver

Skills Development Providers

- SDPs indicated municipalities have restricted staff to work from home and reduced working hours
- Technical ability impacts success of online learning
- Many had no planning trained for the foreseeable future
- Placing learners in workplaces a challenge



Skills Development Considerations

- Overwhelming feedback that skills development to be a priority for next 12 months
- Digital soft skills identified as key
- Lack of online learning platforms a challenge



94% had not experienced retrenchments or liquidations.

- Water and sanitation are considered essential services.

Suspension of projects had knock-on effect on independent consultants and SMMEs

Many smaller businesses were on the verge of closing – in some cases, payment of creditors and staff deferred to mitigate retrenchments

Impact on Larger Employers

- salary cuts
- re-organisation and consolidation
- vacancies remain unfilled

Technical roles remained field-based and support roles were predominantly home-based (more than 50%)

Main Challenges

- Loadshedding
- Data costs, connectivity and availability
- Work-life balance at home
- Discipline

Public sector roles and responsibilities remained largely the same, except where access to tools required roles to be adjusted temporarily

In some instances, work roles and workload skewed

New ways of meeting targets needed

E-learning a challenge for many

Non-readiness of SETAs to create a compliance and quality framework for online training

COVID-19 has exposed SA's lack of online/digital readiness

Inequality of access (only 13% of households have laptops)

Changing of strategic plans and reworking budgets

A readjustment to online work formats

Increase in frequency and length of meetings

Most organisations have put specific COVID-19 projects in place

In some workplaces COVID-19 has increased the PPE compliance and hygiene requirements, requiring upskilling of workers

One large employer made it clear that SETAs "must recognise short courses as a legitimate form of learning"

Curricula needs to be adjusted to remain relevant to the sector and the rapidly changing digital transformation and international trends

Specific comments that came out of group discussions

Most of the skills needs existed prior to the pandemic, but pandemic has highlighted skills weaknesses and increased the urgency of responding to these gaps – particularly digital skills

Skills gaps that existed previously remain important post COVID-19

Are organisations future fit?

Skills gaps being addressed should respond to the type of skill needs and the level of skills required



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