THE NEED FOR A WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING PROGRAMME

ABSTRACT
The main purpose of this research was to investigate the need for a work integrated learning programme in an Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) Company. A questionnaire was developed to measure programme need, programme expectations, retention of graduate interns and programme suggestions. The questionnaire was distributed among a convenience sample of graduate interns (N=79) and mentors (N=39) who participated in the programme in the ICT company. From our findings it was evident that both groups of respondents indicated a definite need for the programme. The majority of the respondents also indicated that the programme met their expectations. In addition, respondents also indicated that the programme contributed towards the employability and retention of graduate interns. Implications are discussed and programme recommendations are made.

INTRODUCTION
The employability of graduates has become an important global theme in the higher educational environment as higher education institutions are constantly called to account for success in the employment of graduates (Kruss, 2004; McIlveen & Pensiero, 2008). However, there is some evidence to suggest that employers and graduates are of the opinion that a tertiary qualification does not necessarily prepares students for the work environment (Kruss, 2004; Griesel & Parker, 2008). Generally, organisations are not able to use new graduates to fill their skill requirements because of a lack of practical skills and experience, the wrong types of graduates being produced, graduates who are not of a high quality and graduates not suited for specialist positions (Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, 2003; Development Policy Research Unit, cited in Pop & Barkhuizen, 2010a). Employers therefore
invest in work integrated learning programmes to optimise the graduate’s successful transition from higher education into the organisation (Kanye & Crous, 2007; Eigsti, 2009).

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the need for a work integrated learning programme in an ICT Company from the perspectives of graduate interns and mentors who participated in the programme. The key aim of the programme was to appoint IT graduates from designated groups on a work integrated learning programme and develop them during an eight month period to prepare them for employability and retention in the company. The programme focused on soft and technical skills training for the graduate interns. Several researchers has identified both the importance of soft and technical skills as contributing to the employability of graduate interns (see Clymer, Roberts & Strawn, 2001; Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, 2003; Menocelli, 2006; Pearce, 2007; Griesel & Parker, 2008; Raftopoulos, Coetzee & Visser, 2009). In addition, mentors were also assigned to the interns to facilitate the learning process and guide the professional development of the intern (Janse van Rensburg & Roodt, 2005). Previous research has shown that the mentorship process is an important predictor of the employability and retention of graduate interns, learners and artisans in organisations (see Pop & Barkhuizen, 2010b; Mummenthey & Du Preez, 2010; Van Rooyen, Du Toit, Botha & Rothmann, 2010).

In the next section of the paper we will discuss the research method applied in this research followed by a presentation of the research findings and discussion of the findings.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

An exploratory research design was followed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods.
Sample

A purposive sample was taken from Graduate Interns (N=79) and Mentors (N=39), who participated in the internship programme. This represented a response rate of 61% for the graduate interns and 75% for the mentors. Graduate intern respondents were primarily male (52%), aged between 20-24 years (50%) and hold bachelor degrees (64%). In this research mentors were primarily male (72%), 30 years and older (90%), had more than 10 years of work experience (87%) and some sort of a tertiary education (84%).

Measurements

In this research we measured programme need, programme expectations, retention, employability of graduate interns and programme improvements.

Programme Need: Programme need for both groups of respondents was measured with a single item on a 5-point scale, ranging from To no extent (1) to A large extent (5). An open ended question was included to obtain additional information.

Programme expectations: Programme expectations were measured by asking the open ended questions to the respondents. The graduate interns were asked: “What was your main reason for coming to the graduate internship programme at the company?” and “Were your expectations met?” The mentors were asked: “What were your expectations of the graduate internship programme?” and “Were your expectations met?”

Retention: Retention was measured by intention to quit (graduate interns) and intention to employ (mentors). Graduate interns were asked to indicate the extent to which they considered quitting the graduate internship programme with a single item on a four-point scale ranging from 1 to 4: 1=Never and 4 = Always. Intention to Employ – Mentors were asked to indicate the extent to which they consider employing the graduate intern on
completion of the programme with 1 item on a scale from 1 to 5: 1=to no extent and 5 = to a large extent. In addition mentors were also asked.

**Programme Suggestions:** An open ended question was included for both respondents to gather information on how the programme can be improved.

**FINDINGS**

**Programme Need**

**Interns:** Findings showed that 95% of the interns positively expressed the need for the internship programme. All interns unanimously supported the need for an internship programme as it provides the bridge between the academic world and the work environment. As mentioned by a graduate intern: “The only real way to get industry exposure is through a program like the internship program. A tertiary qualification gives you most of the theory, but you get no real experience there. An internship program like this one gives an intern some experience so that he can at least be employable, if not by the internship organisation, then at least somewhere else. Then that person can at least say he has some experience in the field.” Comments also indicated that the programme provides practical exposure and experience for graduates and hence develops the talent pipeline and addresses the graduate unemployment rate. “I think it’s a good method to retain skills, when you are introduced to a company through an internship program, you tend to feel indebted to the company to some extent. They believed in you enough to be an employee, that you will prove your worth. This is a very beneficial position to be in for the employer and so long as the intern’s image of the company is not tarnished, he/she will be motivated to prove him/herself.”

**Mentors:** In addition, 77% of the mentors positively expressed a need for a graduate internship programme. The mentors recognised the need for an internship programme of this nature as it contributes to developing a pipeline for future junior consultant skills; providing
opportunities for career and succession planning of entire departments; assisting with retention of good quality young professionals; exposing the organisation to new IT talent and thinking; contributing to the development of young business professionals; giving young people the opportunity for work exposure and delivering on the role as a responsible corporate citizen.

In this regard, some of the comments by the mentors included: “The program exposes the company to new talent in IT via the interns and allows for the company to grow and employ new energetic and motivated staff to take the company to the next level” and It provides the company with the opportunity to get “young blood” early in their respective careers and allows the company to groom them into the resource we require to improve the service we currently provide to our customer base. Another mentor added: “There are always issues about skills shortage in our country, when we have many graduates who cannot find their first opportunity. I believe everyone who is experienced today was given their first opportunity by someone. As a corporate citizen in our country, I believe there is a need for this company to provide the graduates with their first employment opportunity and/or workplace exposure. An Internship programme should form part of the bigger skills programme within the company.”

Programme Expectations

Interns: The vast majority of intern respondents indicated that their expectation regarding the internship programme was met. Some of the comments by the graduate interns included: “I joined the programme because I was interested in learning how the corporate world operates and wanted to grow. The programme exceeded my expectations, because form the beginning I was involved in projects and was treated as the real employee of the company.” Another
graduate intern added: “My main reason to enter into this programme was to gain work experience, learn new things and different ways of doing things, and yes my expectations where met, I got more than what I bargained for-a Job” and “My main reason to come to the programme was to see how relevant my qualifications are and to expand my knowledge in the area I have studied on. My expectations were met to a large extent because I even took on other roles that I initially didn't think I would. The experience taught me to step out and take on challenges or rather opportunities that were available and the support from mentors and general staff was amazing.”

However a few mentioned that expectations were not met due to incorrect position placement versus academic qualification, interest of the mentors and insufficient structure for on-the-job exposure. “Yes my expectations were met but not fully. I feel that interns need to be place in the field they had studied for at university then let them explore other fields.” and “I think there could have been more effort done to place interns in a line of field that more suited our interests and qualifications as I think we were randomly placed into different departments without - considering the above mentioned our individual interests”.

**Mentors:** The majority of mentors indicated that their expectations regarding the internship programme were met with regard to the quality of candidates and structure of programme. As mentioned by a mentor: “I am happy with the programme that we have in place. The quality of development interns’ last round was very good, and we were able to employ 4 of the 6.”

Time availability for efficient mentoring was mentioned as a constraint in providing quality mentorship assistance to the interns. As mentioned by a mentor: “To be a mentor is purely to be a leader. If you do not have enough time to mentor someone you waste his time. The
interns needed in my opinion someone to look after them and lead them towards success. I think we failed in some instances as we are too busy with our own daily tasks.”

Retention of Graduate Interns

Intention to Quit

Our findings showed that 57% of the interns indicated that they never considered quitting the internship programme, while 40.5% considered it, sometimes to often, and only 2.5% considered it all the time. As mentioned by an intern: “I have never thought of quitting simply because of the people who were around me that time, and I made sure that I relate well to them so as to ask for help whenever I needed it.”

Intention to Employ

Our findings showed that 94.9% of mentors considered the employment of the interns, while 5.1% did not consider employment of the interns at all.

The intention to employ as many interns as possible was based on the following factors:

- Operational reality of the organisation at the end of the programme (available positions);
- Candidates with positive attitudes and willingness have a higher chance of employability compared to technical ability alone;
- Dedicated mentors and line managers are required to ensure full benefit of the programme and add true value to the company; and
- The involvement of mentors and line managers in the selection process at the onset of the programme.
Some of the comments of the mentors included: “Dedicated mentors! Without dedicated mentors and committed line managers the intern will not get the full benefit of the program and add the true value to the company.” Another mentor added: “The intern must demonstrate the right attitude and values and the technical skills in line with the vacant position.”

Programme suggestions

The interns made the following suggestions:

- More regular feedback from management on intern progress;
- Conduct technical and soft skill training earlier in the programme;
- Consider extending the programme to a full year;
- Ensure that mentors are suitable and have the inclination for mentoring;
- Align graduate qualification with relevant business unit or department
- Line managers and mentors that indicated a need for interns need to ensure enough work is available to keep interns busy.

Some of the comments of the graduate interns included: “Follow up on mentors if they are doing what they are suppose to be doing and if they are involving the interns in their assignments of the team and giving them relevant allocation of work, making sure the interns are trained and showed how things are done in their department, so that the interns can have confidence in themselves and in their career”.

The mentors made the following suggestions to improve the graduate internship programme:

- Implement a structured training and development plan per intern in business area appointed;
- Technical training must be provided earlier in the programme;
- Managers play an essential role in the success of the programme, therefore buy-in from the business to support the programme from the beginning to end is essential; and
- Reduce numbers of interns in order to make the programme more manageable.

Some of the comments of the mentors included: “Targeted training: A training plan should be done for each Intern. We have to train the interns in the areas that we encounter the most problems in getting staff employed. There a no need to train more desktop technicians as they are readily available in the market. We should actively train the interns to become specialist in IT.” Another mentor added: “From past programmes, I believe that the number of interns should be reduced (although I fully understand why we take on the numbers that we do!). This would enable the process to be better managed, with closer and more intimate involvement and interaction between the interns, mentors and managers.”

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Talent retention is an important topic of debate in the ICT sector in South Africa, given the context of a skills shortage, the relative scarcity of specialist employees and the mismatch between the supply from higher education institutions and the demands of the ICT workplace. It is within this context that this study investigated the experiences of both interns and mentors in a graduate intern programme, concomitant with the propensity of graduates to remain in the company after the completion of the programme.

Generally our findings showed that there is a definite need for a workplace integrated learning programme in the company. For mentors, the need of the internship programme are, amongst others, reflected in its contribution to the development of pipeline skills, career and
succession planning, identifying and bringing right talent into the entry level positions of the organisation, and giving young people the opportunity for work exposure. Graduate interns thus represent an opportunity to bring in bright and energetic people and inject new talent into the organisation (Dodge & McKeough, cited in Kanye & Crous, 2007). In addition, graduate interns indicated that the graduate internship programme provided the bridge between academia and the world of work. In line with Kruss (2004), one can thus argue that work experience and occupational specialisation are the preserve and domain of the employers in the labour market. It is the employers that build on the general foundation laid by higher education institutions to develop the requisite specialised skills, knowledge, and dispositions to produce skilled employees. Our research also showed that the programme was effective in the retention of interns. One can thus argue, the higher the need for a graduate internship programme, the less frequently graduate interns will consider leaving the organisation (See Kruss, 2004; McLveen & Pensiero, 2008).

As deducted from the findings, it is clear that work integrated learning programmes as talent retention strategies are required to enhance the employability of graduate interns. Ideally the components of such a strategy should focus on the recruitment, screening and selection of suitable candidates, soft skills, technical skills and mentorship training, quality control of the mentorship and coaching process and continuous measuring and reporting of programme processes and outcomes (see Pop & Barkhuizen, 2010c).

In conclusion, the absence of any research in the South African environment with regards to graduate intern’s and mentor’s perceptions of the need for a work integrated learning programme makes this research stand out as unique and exploratory in the domain. Furthermore the use of two groups of respondents and the collection of comprehensive data
from both interns and mentors in this study may be construed as providing cutting-edge knowledge in this research area. Numerous studies have focused on the role of the mentor, with very few focusing on the role of the intern. This research highlighted the significance of both parties in the mentorship relationship and the retention of the graduate interns, and therefore forms an important contribution to the research area. The value of mentorship and a graduate intern programme is crucial, given the fact that university training is not aligned with the needs of the corporate workplace. It is with optimism that research of this nature would motivate companies to invest in graduate interns as it is an investment in our future talent.

References


