EXPLORING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING PROGRAMME IN CONTRIBUTING TO THE EMPLOYABILITY OF GRADUATES: THE MENTOR’S PERSPECTIVE

Abstract
The objective of this research was to determine the effectiveness of a work integrated learning programme in contributing to the employability of graduate interns. A questionnaire measuring the effectiveness of soft skills and technical skills training and mentorship was developed and administered among a convenience sample of Mentors (N=39) in an Information, Communication and Technology company. The findings confirmed the importance and effectiveness of the soft skills and technical skills training in enhancing the employability of graduate interns. In addition, findings also revealed the importance of a well structured work integrated learning programme in the enhancement of mentorship effectiveness. Recommendations are made.

INTRODUCTION
The retention of graduates is a challenge due to the migration of skills, scarcity of specialist skills and the undersupply of skilled labour (Frost, 2002; Johnson, 2002). As Generation Y-ers or Millennials begin to enter the workforce, organizations are faced with new challenges as they try to find innovative solutions to retain this group of employees (O'Malley cited in Barkhuizen, Stanz & Du Plessis, in review). Within the current shortage of information technology skills in South Africa, it is imperative that companies that successfully recruit suitable and skilled IT graduates also ensure that they are retained, given the great demand for their skills (Pop & Barkhuizen, 2010). Therefore organisations invest in work integrated learning programmes to attract and retain talented graduate interns.
Work integrated learning programmes are focused training where interns are provided with an opportunity to learn from the various areas of expertise of an employer (Buhlunugu & Metcalfe, 2001, p. 67). In most cases mentors are assigned to graduate interns to facilitate the learning process and guide the professional development of the intern (Janse van Rensburg & Roodt, 2005; Kram, 1985). According to Henson (2006), the mentorship process can include several benefits for the mentor such as improved job satisfaction, career advancement, personal self-development, fresh ideas and feedback concerning projects in progress and assistance in effectively managing projects. The mentorship programme’s success in most cases depends on a number of crucial factors such as management commitment, clear criteria for mentors/mentees, training for mentors/mentees/managers of mentees, clear programme guidelines, close monitor and evaluation of the process and continuous feedback to management/participants/staff (Janse van Rensburg & Roodt, 2005; Kanye & Crous, 2007; Kram 1985). The implementation of a well planned and structured mentorship programme is thus a vital component of employability and retention of graduate interns (Beck-Howard, 2009; Eigsti, 2009; Henson, 2006).

In this research we explore the effectiveness of a work integrated learning programme from the perspective of the mentors who participated in the programme. More specifically we explore the mentor’s perspective of the effectiveness of the components of the programme i.e. soft skills training and technical skills training contributing towards to the employability of graduate interns. The importance of soft skills in the employability of graduate interns has been widely documented (i.e. Clymer, Roberts & Strawn, 2001; Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, 2003; Menocelli, 2006; Pearce, 2007; DPRU, 2007; Griesel & Parker, 2008; Collective Resources, 2008; Raftopoulous, Coetzee & Visser, 2009). Some of the most important soft skills highlighted by these authors include amongst others: interpersonal skills,
motivation, good inter-personal communication skills, business skills and etiquette, team spirit and cohesiveness and showing interest. The lack of soft skills, workplace readiness and experience are the key consideration of the work integrated learning programme in the research setting as part of the strategy to retain the graduates. Therefore, the training of soft skills in the workplace is imperative from an employability point of view. In addition to soft skills some researchers also identified academic and technical skills as an important category of skills required of graduates in the workplace (Clymer et al, 2001; Datta, Pellissery & Paul, 2007; Stanz & Mosoenyane, 2008; Raftopoulous et al., 2009). Taken together, we finally explore the extent to which the learning programme enabled mentorship effectiveness.

In the next section of the paper we will present the research method adopted for this study followed by the research findings and discussion of the findings. We conclude this paper with recommendations for effective mentorship practices as part of work integrated learning programmes.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

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

**Sample**

This research focused on an ICT company that has implemented a work integrated learning programme for IT graduates. A purposive sample was taken from Mentors (N=39), who participated in the programme. This represented a response rate of 75%. 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

- **Soft skills** - A soft skills questionnaire was developed based on the content of the soft skills training in the work integrated learning programme. The questionnaire consisted of 16 items and was similar in content for both the graduate interns and mentors. Each respondent was asked to rank the importance of 16 listed skills on a scale ranging from 1 to 4: 1 = Insignificant and 4 = Very important. After completion of the questionnaire the respondent was asked to identify any other soft skills not addressed in the training. Finally the respondents were asked to rank the five most important graduate soft skills for employability.

- **Technical skills** – The respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which the technical skills training, as part of the work integrated learning programme contributed to the technical skills of the graduate interns with a single item on a five-point scale ranging from 1 to 5: 1 = to no extent and 5 = to a large extent.

- **Mentorship** - Mentors were asked to indicate the extent to which the work integrated learning programme, as enabled him/ her to act as a mentor on a five point scale ranging from 1 = to no extent to 5 = to a large extent.

Open ended questions were included to substantiate the quantitative data.

The findings and discussion of findings are presented in the next section. The findings are presented in a descriptive format.
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Soft Skills Training

The findings of the soft skills training are reported in Graph 1 below.

Graph 1: Findings of the Soft Skills Training

The mean scores in Graph 1 show that there is a definite need for soft skills training for graduate interns as part of a work integrated learning programme. When asked to rank the most important soft skills, mentors indicated that verbal communication, self-motivation, teamwork and goal directedness are the most important soft skills to assist graduate interns in the workplace. The mentors further indicated the need for additional training in soft skills such as analytical thinking, presentation skills and also time management. Some of the comments by the Mentors included: “Must have a "go get 'em" attitude, be self-disciplined, able to work alone unsupervised, be personally driven and take a proactive stance to
“learning i.e. not expect to be spoon fed” and “They must be productive and work purposefully towards completing a task.”

Discussion of findings

The importance of the soft skills training in this work integrated learning programme is supported by The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (cited in HSRC, 2008) which stated that many graduates will lack soft skills such as time management, creative thinking and general communication skills, goal and priority setting as well as team work. Our results confirm the findings of Yorke and Knight (cited by Griesel & Parker, 2009) and the Scottish Higher Foundation (2003) who indicated that employability is amongst others influenced by skilful practices (communication, time management, self and resources, problem-solving and lifelong learning) and meta-cognition (self-awareness and the capability to reflect on, in and for action). Based on the findings, we conclude that the work integrated learning programme contributed to the most important soft skills required for employability.

Technical Skills Training

The findings showed that 84.6% of the mentors believed that the technical skills training contributed to the employability of the graduate intern.

Qualitative responses

The mentor respondents indicated that the technical training in general was sufficient to lay the necessary technical foundation. As mentioned by a mentor: “We require staff that are able to work alone or as part of a team. Their technical training provides them with the foundation they require to be able to diagnose, identify and resolve client's problems.” This statement was supported by another mentor who added: “Without the training received by the
development interns, they would never have been able to fit into the teams, or assist with actual project deliverables. The training also provided them with up-to-date technology which some of the current developers had not yet been exposed to.”

However, some mentors acknowledged the need for more job specific technical training as per business area needs and practical exposure to these technical requirements. As indicated by a mentor: “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 also added “When technical training is in line with the current needs of our clients, we can immediately provide a service which will add value. This will also allow the interns to gain valuable work experience in that particular field.”

Discussion of findings

The importance of the technical skills training in this research is emphasised by Bischoff and Govender (cited by Stanz & Mosoenyane, 2008), who indicated that learning must include practical training, because learners take in knowledge and cannot apply the learning on the job. According to Smith and Kruger (cited in Raftopoulous et al. 2009), graduates are entering a more flexible, insecure and technology-dependent workplace than ever before and therefore need very specific skills required by the workplace in 21st century. Our results confirm the findings of Raftopoulos et al. (2009) where managers indicated technical skills as one of the most employability skills of graduates in the workplace.
Mentorship

The findings showed that 84.9% of the Mentors indicated the work integrated learning programme enabled them to apply their mentorship skills.

Qualitative responses by mentors: Mentors made important observations about the need for the mentoring training programme in how it assisted them in being more effective in the mentoring process. As mentioned by a Mentor: “Working with the interns on almost a daily basis has afforded me the opportunity to apply the skill which I have gained by means of the Mentorship Programme”. This is supported by another mentor who added: “From prior internships I believe the mentorship training is important so effective mentorship can be provided”. Some mentors mentioned time constraints that negatively impacted on the balancing between their mentoring role and fulfilling their normal management duties. A mentor for example indicated: “Though it is time consuming and we have pressures to perform our own specific duties, it has to a fair extent allowed me to spend some quality time with my interns”

Discussion of findings

Our findings support Henson (2006) who highlighted the benefits of mentorship programmes for the mentors. One should however also take cognisance of the time constraints that mentors are facing in the effective execution of the mentoring process. In this context, a more formalised mentoring process will be less time consuming and supplement the informal process (Dinsdale in Janse van Rensburg and Roodt, 2005).
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our research highlighted the importance of mentorship as an integral part of an effective work integrated learning programme. For mentors, the need for a work integrated learning 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).

The data gathered, analysed and interpreted by this research allows for the following recommendations for consideration by mentors when implementing a work integrated learning programme:

- Mentoring is pivotal to the success of the work integrated learning programme and mentoring training should be considered as a pre-requisite for any employee that is considered to fulfil the role of mentor.
- The benefit of mentorship skills through mentor training will have positive effects for all employees managed by a mentor and not only the interns.
- Mentoring must take the form of a structured development programme and not merely a management-by-incident approach.
- It is important that mentors are involved in setting the daily tasks and objectives of the intern, monitor the progress of the intern on a regular basis and provide them with feedback on their progress.
• Mentors could consider job shadowing and rotation within the same department to provide the intern with broader work exposure.

• Mentors must ensure that the work place is adequately prepared prior to the intern commencing the work integrated learning programme.

REFERENCES


