

FORESTRY SKILLS UPLIFTMENT: WHERE IS THE COMMITMENT?

For some time the low level of skills amongst forestry workers has been a major cause of concern – both for the grower companies as well as the national authorities. Despite several initiatives aimed at rectifying this situation, little appears to have happened to date – raising serious questions regarding commitment

One could be forgiven for having felt positive about the prospects for skills upliftment in forestry a short while back. Following on the success of FIETA's SMME I and SMME II projects which provided free training for contractors, there was great support for a further (expanded) initiative, to subsidise further training over a three year period.

The proposed SMME III project – enthusiastically championed by SAFCA'S Jaap Steenkamp – would be aimed at the “emerging” contractor, to provide funding in the order of R2m per annum for the upliftment of “scarce and critical skills” as identified through deliberations between FIETA and various stakeholders.

Finally, one thought, someone was showing commitment to addressing the **real** training needs of the industry.

Around the same time (the exact timing is immaterial – it just seems like such a long time ago) another initiative was tabled at a historic meeting between representatives of certain of the (larger) grower companies. At this meeting the critical lack of training in the industry was highlighted – and described as the main cause of the unacceptably high lost time injury frequency rate (LTIFR), which continues to bedevil corporate safety programmes.

The solution, it was declared, was to engender commitment to training through a system which would entail the creation of a “training fund” to be set up jointly, and through the collaboration of participating growers, to ensure the availability of adequate funds for the conduct of mandatory “compliance” training of forestry workers by contractors.

This ground-breaking initiative was applauded by the majority of stakeholders who attended the meeting – at last the corporates seemed prepared to “put their money where their mouths were” as far as their expressed commitment to training was concerned. It was understood (perhaps somewhat naively) that an agreed percentage was to be added to the contractor’s rates, and then immediately transferred (in the contractor’s name) into the FCPI- administered training pool. A positive development indeed, one thought, and guaranteed to ensure some much-needed commitment to training (not to mention the security of income so desperately needed by an ever-dwindling number of training providers).

At around the same time as these promising developments took shape (once again the exact timing is immaterial), the forestry Standards Generating Body (SGB) was making great strides in the long-overdue registration of the proposed new (level 1 and 3) forestry qualifications in Harvesting, Silviculture, and General Forestry with SAQA, and the subsequent registration of the applicable unit standards with the Department of Labour.

Only those involved in this process would be aware of the countless frustrations and delays involved – suffice to say that the first of the qualifications (Timber Harvesting) was finally registered, along with the unit standards, during 2005. FIETA quickly declared their commitment to funding the applicable Learnerships (this being, after all, one of the stated priorities of the National Skills Strategy), and the required funding for the first Forestry Learnerships was subsequently approved (R23,000-00 per learner).

A new era in Forestry Skills training had (apparently) dawned, and, eager to participate pro-actively in these new initiatives (and to comply with FIETA’S insistence that Training Providers form an association in order to commit to a professional service) a meeting was held in Pietermaritzburg during June, 2006, where the long-anticipated Forest Industries Training Provider’s Association (FITPA) was formally established.

With all these developments they might surely have anticipated a new and dynamic focus on the upliftment of skills in the industry – but how wrong can one be.....

Despite all the promising noises from “up above” (a.k.a.Gauteng) the much-vaunted SMME 3 initiative seems to have disappeared off the radar, with the supposed start-up date having been postponed over and over again (FIETA have, however, recently advertised another road-show for “Providers and Stakeholders” during October, the apparent intention being to underline their requirements for Training Provider accreditation. There is no mention of SMME 3 in the programme outline however; although perhaps this will be addressed under “General”).

The proposed “FCPI Contractor’s Training Levy” initiative, similarly, appears to be still-born, with only a handful of hapless contractors having been signed up (by only ONE of the major growers) to participate in the scheme. Rather than any adjustment being made to their rates, these participants are contributing a percentage of **their own** turnover, to a fund which is being managed on their behalf. It is understood that all future contracts with this grower will make participation in the scheme compulsory!

And it doesn’t get any better.....

Following the first hesitant steps by one or two Training Providers to try and lobby support for Learnerships in forestry, FIETA have now decided, on reviewing their budget (and their targets), to discontinue the incentive payable to training providers for the running of learnerships, and to reduce the grant amount for employers to a paltry R8,000 per learner! (it was never the intention, you must understand, that FIETA would take over the **employer’s** responsibility to provide funding for learnerships, in furtherance of the National objectives).

Despite this apparent about-face, there are still a couple of diehard providers out there apparently willing to shoulder the burden of running learnerships – but with little (if any) support from the powers-that-be. Notwithstanding FIETA’S insistence that training providers form an association in order to gain recognition (and “official” participation in FIETA’s deliberations affecting forestry training), and despite several formal communications from the newly-formed Training Provider’s

Association, FIETA have yet to respond to – or even acknowledge - the attempt to comply with their own directive!

If all this sounds negative, it is only one individual's reaction to a perceived lack of commitment to the (widely acknowledged) industry-wide crisis concerning the low level of skills amongst forestry workers. Whilst noble and promising attempts have admittedly been made to address the problem, it would seem that the only **real** commitment lies with a (diminishing) number of contractors who, against the odds, continue to meet the basic training requirements of their workforce.
