

A great way to reduce the cost of BEE Skills Development Points

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Imagine the typical intern. Young and keen to learn, they approach your business for work experience. You give them a holiday job so they can get a feel for how things work in the real world. If you're lucky, your intern has a knack for the job and adapts well to the workplace culture. New hire, 1. Recruitment fees, 0.



Although the holiday job/volunteer-type internship still exists, the South African skills development landscape offers a more formal approach to this method of learning that holds real benefits for businesses. In fact, for many organisations, internships are a better choice than learnerships. Let's explore why.

Just like learnerships, internships are accredited

The first myth we need to debunk is that internships are unaccredited. Although they're not necessarily registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), internships are accredited by statutory or professional bodies.

Think for example of the legal profession. Here, a one- or two-year candidacy programme (or internship) at a law firm is required before you can register as an attorney. This internship is not a loose collection of 'volunteer tasks', it's highly structured and is overseen by the Legal Practice Council – a professional body in the legal sector. Similarly, other professional bodies monitor the quality of internships in their sector – internships that are often required for professional registration or licensing.

And all this is important because of BEE. Many internships fall in Category C of the Learning Programme Matrix, where they're defined as:

"Recognised or registered structured experiential learning in the workplace that is required after the achievement of a qualification – formally assessed by a statutory occupational or professional body."

Category C internships that are recognised by professional bodies, and that can lead to professional registration or licensing, are therefore 'accredited' (for internships the word is 'endorsed') insofar as BEE is concerned.

Internships are equally relevant to new and experienced employees

Unlike learnerships, which are linked to a specific qualification, internships are linked to the competencies identified by the relevant professional body. And this makes internships relevant to all your employees. Why? Let's find out.

A learnership is a work-based route to obtaining a qualification. On completion of the theoretical instruction (delivered by a training provider) and practical experience (delivered in the workplace), the learner obtains an NQF-registered qualification. In contrast, those who complete an internship do not gain credits on the NQF. Instead, they have mastered the competencies identified by the relevant professional body to succeed in this profession.

For example, the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP) – the leading professional body in the HR sector – has identified five core competencies for HR professionals:

- Leadership and personal credibility
- Organisational capability
- Solution creation and implementation
- Interpersonal and communication
- Citizenship for the future: Innovation, technology and sustainability

The SABPP only endorses internships that cover one or more of these competencies. On completion of an SABPP-endorsed internship, learners are able to register with the SABPP and apply for a professional designation such as HR Technician, HR Associate, HR Professional, etc. As you can imagine, registration with a professional body, and a professional designation to boot, opens up many doors for employees – both those who are new to the workplace and those who have been at it for many years.

Internships can be customised to your business's needs

Since an internship is linked to competencies instead of a qualification, you have a wider range of options when it comes to customising the internship for your particular needs.

Although most internships run between six and 12 months, there is no hard and fast rule when it comes to the duration. It all depends on how long your employees need to master the competencies covered in the internship.

Furthermore, you can add your own content, examples, case studies, policies and procedures to the internship to really boost its benefits to your business. To use the SABPP example again, if you're running an internship on 'leadership and personal credibility', you could include your business's own leadership framework, practical activities set by leaders in the business, masterclasses presented by your C-suite, and even technical training offered by your favourite presenter.

Internships enhance a culture of mentoring and knowledge-sharing

Unlike learnerships, internships rely heavily on mentoring or coaching. After all, the idea is to master certain practical competencies and apply these in the real world of work. While members of your C-suite and executive management team can (and should) act as mentors, you can also use professional coaches and thought leaders outside your business.

The focus on practical application and mentoring means that the internship will lead to more than just a framed certificate on the wall – there's actually a real possibility that it'll have a positive impact on your bottom line.

Internships do not require time away from work

Traditionally, learners on learnerships have needed to complete most (if not all) of their theoretical training on-site with the training provider. This is primarily due to the sheer mass of content that needs to be covered, as well as the SETAs' stringent (dare we say outdated?) approach to learner assessment and verification. Absent employees are a luxury that few businesses can afford – especially when it comes to more senior employees.

Luckily, most professional bodies have more trust in today's digital tools. As long as the content is top-quality, and the assessments are matched to the required competencies, professional bodies are generally more than happy to endorse online internships. This means that learners can work through the material (and often even attend mentoring sessions) any time, and from anywhere.

Internships improve your BEE Scorecard

As we mentioned, many internships fall in Category C of the Learning Programme Matrix – which will win you BEE points – and spending on internships can be claimed back from your Skills Development Levy. Furthermore, regardless of whether your 'interns' are employed (existing employees) or unemployed (employed only for the duration of the internship), you can claim their salaries as part of your skills development target spend.

Note on Category B internships

Category C internships (which we've discussed in this article) are a great way to make sure that your business and employees benefit from current, relevant and industry-recognised training. However, these internships don't necessarily qualify for discretionary grants from the SETA. To access these grants, you'll need to jump through a few hoops.

A Category B internship is similar to a learnership in that it's based on an NQF qualification. There are a multitude of pre-approvals and rules you'll need to navigate before implementing a Category B internship, so make sure you're aware of these before you start the process.

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