





# “Skills profile of technical staff in the south African local government sector: an empirical survey”

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# SKILLS PROFILE OF TECHNICAL STAFF IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT SECTOR: AN EMPIRICAL SURVEY

## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to reflect on the findings of a local government sector-wide technical skills audit. A mixed-method research design was followed in both a positivist and interpretivist scientific paradigm to conduct the survey in local, district and metropolitan municipalities. Quantitative and qualitative data were processed and thematic analyses were done per respondent and participant category to obtain rich descriptions of current technical skills challenges and skills development priorities in local government. From the empirical survey it is evident that significant technical skills shortages exist, especially in rural district and local municipalities. This severely compromises the delivery of the four basic technical services, namely water provision-ing, waste management, sanitation and sewerage, and electricity.

## Keywords

skills audit, technical skills, municipalities, Local  
Government Sector Education and Training Authority,  
skills profile

**JEL Classification** J24, M53

## INTRODUCTION

Based on the principles of a constitutional democracy, local governance draws more closely to the needs of the people. The effective dispensation of this responsibility depends largely on the capability, knowledge and skills of municipal employees to successfully perform their responsibilities and functions. In terms of the Skills Development Act 97 of 1998, Chapter 3, section 10, the Local Government Sector Education and Training Authority (LGSETA) must receive and approve workplace skills plans of all municipalities in South Africa. The accuracy and reliability of such workplace skills plans can only be ensured if municipalities regularly conduct skills audits per job category in the sector.

Skills audits are generally undertaken to determine and record the skills base of individuals or groups within an organization. The general aim of such audits is to pinpoint potential gaps between the skills and knowledge the organization requires to successfully operationalize its strategic objectives and the level of skills and knowledge it currently possesses. The result of a skills audit is usually a skills gap analysis which helps to obtain a comprehensive skills profile of an organization. The ultimate intended outcome of skills audits in the local government sector is to develop a sector skills development plan aligned to the sector skills development strategy. Skills audits furthermore guide resource allocation to develop skills through appropriate training interventions. As such, skills audits validate official workplace skills plans.

This article reports on the findings of an empirical survey of the status of skills of technical staff in municipalities. The survey was undertaken to obtain a profile of the skills base of employees in technical positions, to pinpoint skills development challenges, and to make recommendations regarding addressing potential skills gaps in the delivery of four basic technical services, namely water provisioning, waste management, sanitation and sewerage, and electricity. A mixed-method research design was followed to conduct the survey in local, district and metropolitan municipalities in all nine provinces of South Africa. Quantitative and qualitative data revealed current technical skills challenges and skills development priorities in local government.

## 1. SKILLS CONCEPTUALIZED

The concept “skill” is generally regarded as the ability to carry out a task with pre-determined results often within a given amount of time, energy, or both (Velada et al., 2007, p. 2). To this, Grindle and Hildebrand (1995, p. 442) add that skills also refer to the ability of employees to perform tasks effectively, efficiently and sustainably. Skills can generally be divided into domain-general and domain-specific skills. For example, in the domain of municipal functions, some general skills would include time management, leadership, organizing, planning and others, whereas domain-specific skills would be useful only for a certain job, such as technical services (Niaz, 2011, p. 3). Ongori and Nzozo (2011, p. 3) and Zeiger (2014, p. 1) highlight the need for training to improve the skills levels of individuals. The goal of training is primarily to empower employees to master certain specific conduct and behaviors related to their specific functions (De Wet & Van der Walddt, 2013, p. 49).

Skills improvement initiatives such as training are grounded in various human development theories. The rationale for examining these theories is based on the fact that it provides foundations for meta-theoretical arguments and set theoretical parameters for an analysis of skills profiles. According to Olum (2004, p. 12) and Francis (2012, p. 1), these theories can be classified according to different periods, namely classical, neo-classical and more contemporary theories. To this, Mahmood et al. (2012, p. 9), Pham (2014, p. 1), and Thenmozhi (2014, p. 12) add that variations in human resource development, thought associated with each period, are mainly the result of multiple perspectives, including modern and postmodern views, as well as organizational culture. These theories provide a cognitive justification of the building of skills of technical staff in municipalities.

### 1.1. Conducting skills audits

A skills audit can be regarded as a process to measure and record the skills base of an individual or group (Meyer et al., 2007, p. 86). The main purpose for conducting a skills audit is to identify the skills and knowledge that the organization requires, as well as the skills and knowledge that the organization currently has (Murphy, 2001, p. 5). Skills audits are also usually done to determine training needs so an organization can improve its skills and knowledge. However, skills audits are also completed for other reasons such as restructuring of organizations and deployment of staff (Liebowitz et al., 2000, p. 4). It gathers more information than simply qualifications. It firstly identifies the skills matrices for the organization and then delves into what the current competencies are of each individual against this predefined set of skills required to fulfil a specific role (Knechel & Salterio, 2016, p. 17). According to Rao (2014, p. 78), a skills audit needs to pinpoint at least the following:

- competency standards of employees to be appointed with the requisite skills, expertise and qualifications;
- the requisite qualifications, experience, functional, technical, managerial, leadership and generic competence required for the different posts identified;
- technical skills gaps and lack of relevant competencies;
- professionalism and regulation by professional bodies and government; and
- the capacity required of appointed officials (to improve the sector’s qualifications profile and competence).

The outcome of a thorough skills audit is usually a skills gap analysis. This analysis generally enables management to make key decisions and to allocate adequate resources to improve the capacity of employees (Petrick et al., 1999, p. 160).

There are numerous techniques to conduct a skills audit based on the context and strategy of the organization. It is vital that the first step in implementing a skills audit is to analyze the organizational context and strategy in relation to the objectives of the skills audit. The context of the organization may be identified based on time available, logistical issues, primary reasons for the skills audit and the prevalent socio-political environment (Leinicke et al., 2005, p. 35). The organizational strategy provides the basis for alignment of skills to current and future organizational needs. This alignment is essential to ensure consistency with business strategy and value of skills audit results. Skills audits may be conducted in various ways. Current approaches to skills audits include assessment panels, 360 degree assessments, focus groups, self-assessments, and one-on-one interviews (Lindow & Race, 2002, p. 30).

## **2. BACKGROUND TO AND OVERVIEW OF THE TECHNICAL SKILLS AUDIT PROJECT**

As revealed by various audit and performance reports from agencies and institutions such as Cities Network, Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), and the Auditor General, capacity building in the local sphere of government remains a serious dilemma due to challenges such as chronic poverty, low revenue bases, unemployment, poor political and administrative leadership, and general incompetence of employees. This is despite the fact that local government remains the most significant domain where actual service delivery is taking place.

In combating this state of affairs the South African Government established various mechanisms to facilitate skills development in municipalities.

These include compulsory workplace skills planning, the appointment of skills development facilitators (SDFs) and the creation of training coordinating committees. These committees should support and bolster the training function of human resource departments to ensure proper workplace skills planning and implementation are done. The compilation of the workplace skills plan must ideally be based on regular skills audits to identify training needs and priorities. By means of a skills gap analysis, the discrepancies between the skills currently available and skills required to successfully execute the constitutional mandate of local government can be established. With this in mind, GAPSKILL, a web-based skills audit tool, was developed and made available to all municipalities by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) in August 2011. Workplace skills plans should ideally be informed by skills gap analyses and facilitated by GAPSKILL.

A further initiative as far as skills development is concerned, is the Department of Cooperative Governance's Revised National Capacity Building Strategy (NCBS) (Cogta, 2014, p. 8). The NCBS (Cogta, 2014, p. 8) stipulates that all appointed officials must have requisite qualifications, experience and functional/technical, managerial/leadership and generic competence and continued professional development.

In response to the National Skills Development Strategy III (DHET, 2011) of establishing a credible institutional basis for skills planning, the LGSETA conducts various sectoral larger-scale research projects. These research projects are instrumental in informing the sectoral skills plan that enables the LGSETA to produce a credible performance information documents, namely annual performance plans and strategic plans. One of the critical outputs of the research projects is the development of the sectoral qualifications and implementation of the skills development interventions as proposed in the research findings. These research projects are underpinned by the national priorities of the Government, the LGSETA's strategic focus areas, the back-to-basics approach, as well as the key municipal performance areas.

Technical skills are those abilities acquired through learning and practice. They are often job- or task-specific; in other words, a particular skill set or proficiency required to perform a specific job or task. Most municipalities at all categories are struggling to operate and maintain their services infrastructure in a cost-effective and sustainable manner. These challenges are generally a result of poor technical skills, the absence of such skills, and the shortage of technical skilled professionals leading to most municipalities outsourcing their technical services to consultants. In light of this reality the expected deliverables of the LGSETA's commissioned technical skills audit were specified as follows:

- to provide an analysis on the technical skills challenges in the local government sector;
- to conduct a skills audit on technical skills;
- to identify factors that contribute to the non-functionality of technical divisions; and
- to make recommendations regarding possible interventions on skills gaps in technical occupations.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The technical skills audit was undertaken by Enterprises UP with the assistance of an experienced research team. One of the first steps was to establish a consultative platform comprised of experts in the sector, including senior local government officials and research methodology professionals. Interactive sessions were held to:

- pinpoint the most suitable research design and methodology to be employed for the technical skills audit;

- survey literature on international skills audit best practice;
- identify critical elements they perceived as essential to include in the questionnaire and interview schedule; and
- set the desired climate for the research.

#### 3.1. Audit scope and sampling

The research obtained a representative sample of the entire local government sector in South Africa. A national survey was thus conducted in all nine provinces. At the time of the municipal elections of August 3, 2016, there were 8 metropolitan, 44 district, and 205 local municipalities in South Africa. Based on statistical calculations, a representative sample of 36 municipalities were both randomly and purposively sampled (i.e. 1 metro/or capital city per province, 1 district and 2 local municipalities per province [ $n = 36$ ]). The sampled municipalities were representative of:

- the categories of municipalities;
- rural-urban settings; and
- dysfunctional and high-capacity municipalities.

#### 3.2. Research process and phases

In determining the most suitable audit method, the following factors were considered: resource requirements (time, cost, labor intensity) and, most importantly, the ability of the method to gather as much of the required information with sufficient validity and reliability.

The research process followed is depicted in Figure 1 below.

Source: Authors' own compilation.

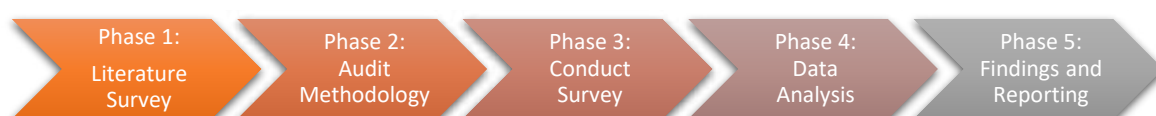


Figure 1. Research phases

## Phase 1: Conceptual and contextual analyses

A robust literature survey (as outlined in section 1 above) was conducted to pinpoint the theories, principles, approaches, processes and strategies associated with skills audits. The literature survey also guided the research team to identify the nature of technical skills (e.g. type, positions, post levels, job descriptions) in the South African local government sector. Document analysis of official reports regarding the status of local government was also done, including surveys and reports from Stats SA, LGSETA, SALGA, the Department of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) and the Auditor General. This facilitated the design of a comprehensive local government profile as far as the capacity of local, district and metropolitan municipalities in general and technical services in particular are concerned. This profile was imperative to identify low-, medium-, and high-capacity municipalities for sampling purposes.

Through consultative processes contact was made with the Municipal Infrastructure Support Agency (MISA) to obtain information and statistics pertaining to national technical skills profiles and general skills deficits. This further guided the design of the questionnaire and interview schedule.

## Phase 2: Audit methodology

The purpose of the second phase was to plan and design the entire project on a national scale. Two participant groups were identified. The first group comprised the primary target population, namely the supervisors and foreman of technical staff in municipalities. A questionnaire was utilised as data collection instrument for this group. The questionnaire (see Appendix B) was distributed via e-mail and respondents completed the questionnaire online. This data collection instrument made provision for biographical details, as well as Yes/No, Likert scale, and open-ended questions.

The questionnaire was piloted (pre-tested) with 13 respondents from the target group. This ensured that all questions were well-formulated and understood. Telephonic follow-ups were made to

obtain the commitment from respondents and to secure an adequate response rate.

The second group served as reference cohort to validate and cross-reference the responses obtained from the first group. This group was selected to obtain a comprehensive systemic and strategic overview of technical skills challenges in the local government sector. This group comprised of:

- a. Directors Corporate Services;
- b. Skills Development Facilitators (SDFs);
- c. Directors Infrastructure;
- d. Senior Managers: Technical Services;
- e. Heads of Project Management Units (i.e. technical project oversight, where applicable);
- f. Chairs of the Municipal Public Accounts Committees (MPAC) (i.e. political/financial oversight of capital projects);
- g. Chairs of Portfolio and/or Standing Committee for Infrastructure Development.

An interview schedule was designed to conduct face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with this group. The interview schedule (see Appendix C), made provision for the assessment of skills, experience in current position, years of other relevant experience, qualifications (formal/non-formal), as well as the identification of skills development obstacles (e.g. personal, systemic, resources, equipment, supervision, probation, induction, mentorship, on-the-job-training, career development, retention, and morale).

## Phase 3: Conducting the audit survey

Phase three entailed the identification and training of fieldworkers for interviews with the first target group to cross-reference and verify data collected from the second target (reference) group. The fieldworkers, under close supervision of the research team, travelled to the 36 sampled municipalities.



As with most audits of this nature, not all the managers who were targeted were willing to participate, and not all managers who indicated a willingness to participate sent in their questionnaires.

### Phase 4: Data analyses

Data capturers were appointed to record the raw data on statistical software and Excel spread sheets. Based on the principles of Chi-Square tests, a comparative analysis was undertaken to contrast and compare the responses of the two target groups. A thematic analysis was then done to determine the main categories of responses obtained from the questionnaire and interviews. Finally, a frequency analysis was done to determine the relative importance or significance of responses made pertaining to technical skills development challenges. A response rate of 55% for the questionnaire (100/180) and 60% (152/252) for interviews was achieved. The responses could thus be regarded as representatives of the target population.

### Phase 5: Findings and reporting

The final phase entailed the final verification and cross-referencing of findings, the identification of key observations made by the research team during the audit process.

### 3.3. Data collection instrumentation

A questionnaire was developed based on the results of the comprehensive literature review and input obtained from local government experts, senior officials and research experts. An interview schedule was further designed based on the results of the literature review and input obtained from local government experts, senior officials and research experts. The interview schedule was utilized by field-workers to conduct face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with the secondary target population, namely key municipal role-players and stakeholders regarding technical staff. As stated, the second group acted as reference cohort to validate and cross-reference the responses obtained from the first group. This group was selected to obtain a comprehensive systemic and strategic overview of technical skills challenges in the local government sector.

### 3.4. Ethical considerations

Based on the stringent and rigorous ethical clearance procedures at the University of Pretoria, the necessary documentation was completed and a clearance number was allocated to the project. The ethical considerations included voluntary participation of both respondents and participants (i.e. all participants signed a declaration of consent to participate), and anonymity and confidentiality of responses and respondents.

## 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section outlines the findings of both the interviews and questionnaires. These findings are aimed at addressing the stated objectives of the research. General conclusions and observations are added to contextualise the responses obtained. The graphs below reflect the geographical and biographical profile of participants and respondents.

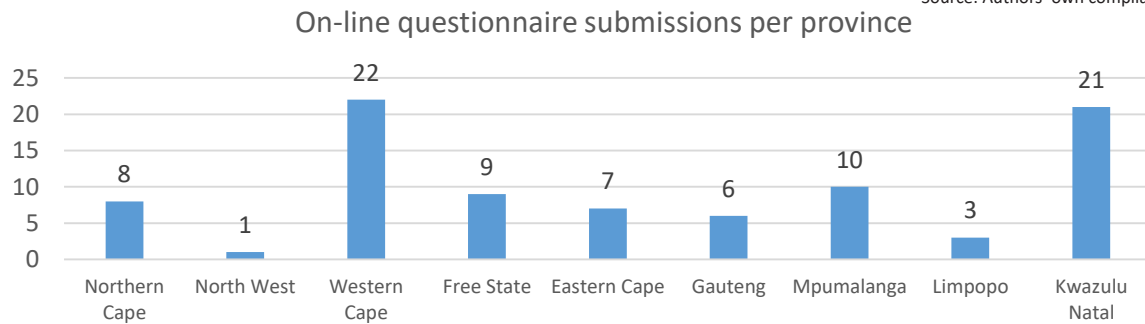
The findings of the skills audit are summarized per cohort group (i.e. target groups 1 and 2) and per project deliverables below.

### 4.1. Findings: technical skills challenges in the local government sector

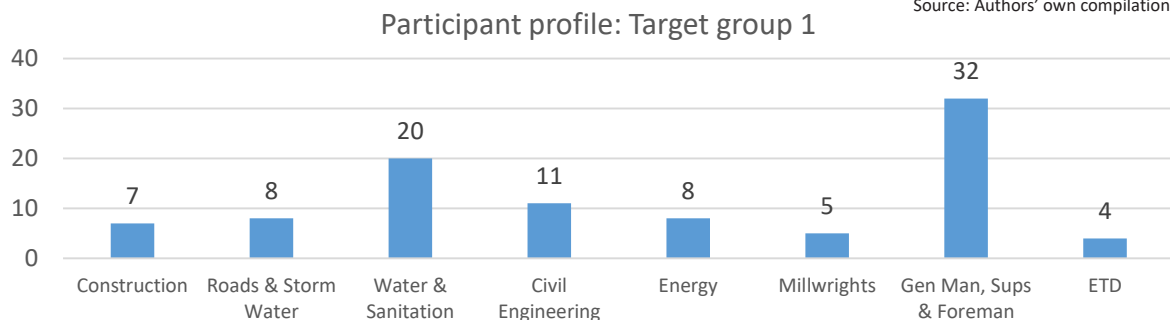
#### 4.1.1. Target group 1: *supervisors and foreman of technical staff*

The majority of respondents (78.2%) from target group 1 is of the opinion that staff morale is the element having the highest impact on the current skills levels of technical staff in municipalities. Other elements that are also having a significant impact on skills levels are availability of technical staff, availability of resources, low priority and resource base for skills development, and limited staff retention. In response to the enquiry about municipalities' effectiveness in developing the skills of technical staff, two thirds of respondents indicated that political dynamics in municipalities, inadequate technical skills development and related financial constraints are the major constraints. More than half of the respondents (56.4%) are of the opinion that the impact of vacant posts on the

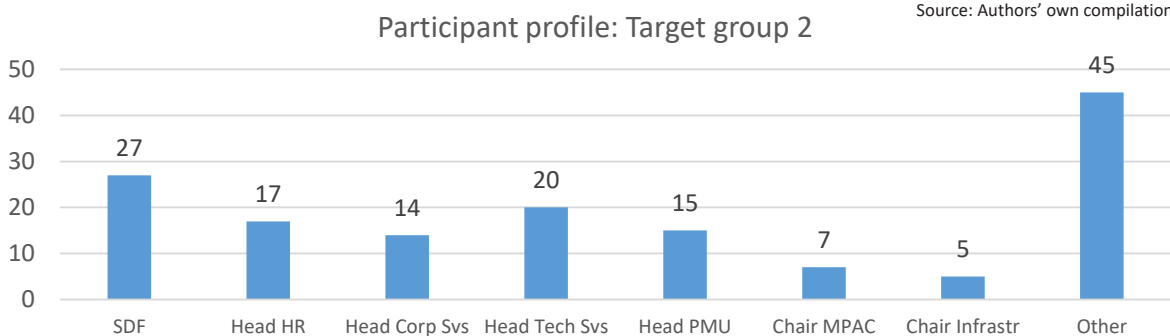
Source: Authors' own compilation.

**Figure 2.** Geographical and biographical profile of participants and respondents

Source: Authors' own compilation.

**Figure 3.** Profile of target group 1

Source: Authors' own compilation.

**Figure 4.** Profile of target group 2

successful implementation of technical projects is significant and a third of the respondents feel that the impact is detrimental for the quality of basic service delivery.

A further challenge identified by respondents is that managers' and supervisors' involvement in the workplace skills development planning process is inadequate and that the process is done in isolation by excluding employees for whom this development is intended (67.2%). They further reflect that supervisors are generally unaware of curriculum content of training programs, as well as the expectations of technical staff. Supervisors

generally feel that the workplace skills development planning process is not fully aligned with the overall organizational strategy and the selection of training interventions is not in accordance with a proper needs analysis.

The majority of respondents (85%) do not access and use the GAPSKILL tool for technical skills purposes and the compilation of personal development plans (PDPs). Nearly half of the respondents (48.7%) are not aware of annual skills audits being conducted in the municipality and 75% of those that are aware of the skills audit are of the opinion that the audit process is



ranging between totally invalid to average. Half of all respondents are of the opinion that the municipality's performance management system (PMS) does not add value as an instrument to identify technical training needs. Reasons cited for this opinion are because training needs identified are not reflected in training interventions, PMS outputs are poorly implemented, and the performance contracts are only applicable to top management. The respondents' reaction to listing the most significant challenges and obstacles and related recommendations can be summarized under the following key areas:

- issues related to public financial management processes and the funding available for training and development;
- the absence of a culture of learning in municipalities;
- the need for opportunities for learning and development;
- inefficiency of current human resource management processes and practices; and
- misalignment of technical skills development processes to support the overall organizational strategy.

#### **4.1.2. Target group 2: senior managers and political representatives**

The majority of participants (63.4%) are of the opinion that the poor quality of supervision, ineffective human resource policies and planning, the low strategic priority of skills development, the relative unavailability of technical staff, as well as the general unavailability of resources, equipment and tools are the most significant challenges as far as skills development is concerned. In response to questions related to the effectiveness of municipalities to develop the skills of technical staff, nearly one third of all interviewees are of the opinion that:

- skills development for technical staff is regarded as a low priority and the allocation of funds for training are very limited;

- in general there is a lack of experienced staff with no initiatives to retain them, resulting in a situation of poor supervisory and management skills; and
- the local government technical skills environment is also faced with a situation of staff with low levels of literacy and an aging work force that are not interested in training and development.

Derived from interviews conducted about the most significant challenges and obstacles associated with skills development of technical staff, the following areas can further be highlighted:

- lack of a proper skills development plan resulting in a lack of technical skills development opportunities;
- lack of resources, with specific reference to financial constraints;
- it seems that municipalities are not serious about training and skills development plans leading to a lack of commitment;
- human resource departments, including SDFs are generally not familiar with the unique requirements pertaining to technical skills development and are ignorant towards the development of technical staff;
- in some provinces and regions there is limited access to accredited training institutions and staff had to travel long distances to attend training programs.

#### **4.1.3. General factors leading to limited technical skills capacity**

The general lack of finances earmarked for training and development was singled out as the most significant factor leading to non-functionality. However, in follow-up questions with participants, it became apparent that money received from the LGSETA for training is not "ring-fenced" for training. Municipalities often utilize this money for other purposes. Respondents indicated that since skills development is generally not regarded as a strategic priority or critical performance

area, in cases of “belt-tightening”, council simply take away money from the training budget to fund other imperatives. Other factors leading to limited technical skills development, include the following:

- Job descriptions and specifications are generally absent. This makes it extremely difficult to determine whether technical staff comply with the conditions and requirements of the position. This, of course, hampers consequence management and the measurement of skills gaps.
- The SDFs are not always utilized in the capacity for which they were appointed.
- There is a general lack of coordination between the Heads of Department, Human Resource departments and SDFs, as well as general incoherence (or absence) between the Human Resource Development Strategy and Work Place Skills Plans. It seems that structures and role-players, including councillors and portfolio committees, do not function in a synchronized manner.
- The Municipal Public Accounts Committees (MPACs) are often non-functional in local and district municipalities. This seriously hampers financial oversight over technical projects and the way money allocated for training and development is eventually spent.
- A significant number of respondents indicated that technical staff often utilize training for personal gain; they use it as a “stepping stone” to go to higher-capacity municipalities or the private sector. Often staff lobby for the “outsourcing” of all technical services, but then intend to resign to become part of the private entity or ensure that family or friend get the contracts.
- Trade testing is not done at technical colleges. Staff only receive theoretical training without getting document proof that they completed certain training programs. They thus do not have evidence of training when they would like to apply for vacant technical positions.

- Often senior managers commute between the municipality where they work and the area where they stay (i.e. neighboring municipality). They thus do not take ownership of technical service delivery problems in the particular municipal area since service issues such as electricity and water supply, and sewerage do not affect them personally. They thus generally lack the commitment to take action.

#### 4.2. Recommendations regarding possible skills interventions in technical occupations

Based on the coding and thematic analyses of open-ended responses of both target groups, the following general and specific recommendations can be made for the improvement of technical skills in the local government sector:

- It is evident that training and development is not regarded as a strategic key performance area in municipalities. The Directors Corporate Services, HODs for Human Resource Management and SDFs should be regarded as strategic partners in the operationalization of strategic objectives, the design and implementation of the IDPs, and the long-term service delivery improvement imperatives in local government.
- All relevant structures and role-players should better utilize the GAPSKILL tool as instrument for skills development.
- Although the technical skills colleges in metropolitan municipalities can add significant value the problem is that employees generally only get theoretical training. There is very limited practical application and therefore actual skills of technical staff cannot be trade tested. This result in the fact that individuals who were trained by these trade colleges remain unemployed. This is the case despite the dire need for technical skills in often neighboring cities and towns. The mobility and recruitment of trained technicians to other municipalities should thus be investigated. Training colleges should provide both theoretical and trade testing facilities.

- It is further recommended that skilled senior officials or technical professionals should mentor more junior or inexperienced technical staff. There is therefore the need for mentorship and career coaching skills development programme in municipalities.
- A further recommendation is that the functioning of training committees should be optimized. Especially in low-capacity local municipalities these committees do not perform their coordinating functions.
- It is evident that there is generally an absence of professionally-conducted skills audits, needs analysis, skills gaps analysis, workplace skills planning, and personal development plans. These mechanisms are instrumental in validating adequate responses and skills development interventions. It is further recommended that performance contracting be cascaded down to lower job levels.

On a more strategic level the following interventions are recommended to improve the skills levels of technical staff:

- Development of a Sector Skills Development Strategy: It is highly recommended that a comprehensive skills development strategy be developed for the sector. This strategy should include systems, structures, roles and responsibilities, target dates, performance indicators, and the allocation of adequately authority to key officials for the execution thereof.
- Adequate development of SDFs: It is suggested that specific training program for SDFs should be designed to give them adequate authority to design and implement skills development interventions in municipalities.
- Process-mapping of skills development: It is evident that there is a general misconception about the role and place of skills development in municipalities. A systems approach should be followed to gain a systemic overview (i.e. 360 degree perspective) of the key processes associated with skills development in especially local and district municipalities.

The path from skills gaps analysis, intervention, to service delivery improvement should be mapped to pinpoint responsibilities, performance targets, performance indicators, monitoring and assessment measures, and training intervention schedules.

- Training of technical staff and managers of technical fields: Both “hard” technical skills such as brick-laying, construction, water pipe-laying, and electrical connections, as well as “soft” skills development should receive attention. Project management can be singled out as one field with the highest frequency reported by respondents and participants. Soft skills including mentoring, coaching, supervision, leadership, organizing, coordination, monitoring and control, performance assessments and appraisals, are further required. Supervisors should be able to guide technical staff towards achieving training and development targets reflected in their individual personal development plans (PDPs).
- Creating a culture of learning: The survey shows evidence of a neglected learning culture that breeds conformity and stagnation. Generally, there is a lack of responsibility for own career paths and limited evidence of basic education of staff that resulted into a lack of interest in further studies and a situation of training people with no aptitude for the work and limited ambition.
- Human resource capability as a strategic partner in council: The research shows evidence of a human resources capability that are viewed by respondents as merely “operational” with limited input in employment functions beyond “hiring and firing”. Research data in particular shows the lack of a well-functioning human resources department leading to a lack of information and poor communication. Furthermore, there is evidence of an ageing workforce and the loss of experienced personnel due to staff retention.
- Skills development system that is effective and functional: The research has shown that managers’ and supervisors’ involvement in the workplace skills development planning process

is inadequate and that the process is done in isolation by excluding supervisors. Supervisors are of the opinion that the workplace skills development planning process is not aligned to the overall organizational strategy and the selection of training interventions is not in accordance with a proper needs analysis. Nearly half of the respondents are not aware of Annual Skills Audits being conducted in the municipality and most of those that are aware of the skills audit are of the opinion that the audit process is ranging between totally invalid to average. There is further evidence that skills development is not approached holistically and that skills development facilitators are not performing as expected. From interviews conducted it is evident that in many municipalities the training committees are non-existent or dysfunctional at best. Key role-players such as the municipal manager, senior operational managers, the Head of Human Resources, representatives of trade unions and the Councillor responsible for human resources matters are not actively involved in the management of training and skills development. Skills development is still seen to be the sole responsibility of the training and development department (SDF). Managers simply identified what training they thought their employees wanted, and then sent through a request to the training and development function for this training to be sourced and implemented. Management fails to establish an approach to skills development that is closely aligned to an organisation's business and strategic objectives which is critical to the success both of the skills development legislation and the organization.

- Opportunities for learning and development: Flexible workplace training and learning arrangements are conducive to development of a broad range of skills. Workplace training allows students not only to learn the technical skills related to a particular job, but also to develop soft skills, such as communication, ICT, teamwork, problem-solving and the ability to learn, that are ever more critical in a changing local government environment. Many municipalities face budget constraints when it comes to the implementation of training, therefore, the need

to accept the fact that learning does not only happen in training rooms, but various creative and more efficient options exist such as on-the-job, through coaching and mentoring, through self-study and distance learning with the application of world class technology available.

#### 4.3. General observations and lessons learned

The political dynamics at some municipalities made the audit process extremely challenging. In some instances the field-workers travelled to municipalities only to learn that some of the senior managers did not agree amongst themselves to participate in the project. The high levels of non-commitment to participate, cancellation of appointments, and infighting in municipalities made the process time-consuming and expensive. It has led to re-appointments to be made, as well as additional travel and accommodation costs. Other specific observations and lessons learned include the following:

- Concept "audit": It is evident that the term "audit" should be avoided in similar projects in future. The concept conjures images and perceptions of Auditor General audits of financial statements and budget spending. This made some officials very reluctant to participate or to speak freely about their skills development challenges and concerns. When the field-workers referred to the technical skills audit as a "survey" instead, attitudes immediately changed.
- SDF forums: As far as skills development is concerned it is evident that quarterly SDF Forums should be utilised as instrument to gain commitment in future regarding participation in similar surveys. These forums are also ideally positioned to gain detailed insight into the status of technical skills in municipalities.
- Role of SDFs: The role and functioning of SDF country-wide should receive serious attention. Most SDF revealed that they simply 'tick some boxes for compliance sake'. They are not utilised as a strategic asset for organisational performance and

growth. Many are in acting positions and are excluded from opportunities to be influential in terms of the development of municipal staff. The biggest challenge with the role and functioning of SDFs is the fact that most of them have other titles within the HR (development) environment with the additional responsibilities of a SDF added to their existing roles. The ideal situation is an appointed full-time SDF.

- Scheduling of surveys: Municipal officials made it clear that from December 15 to

January 13 annually it will be virtually impossible to make arrangements for the site visits due to the festive season. SDF's find it also difficult to arrange interviews on one day.

- Communication: General coordination and communication seem to be a major challenge in the local government sector. Direct face-to-face communication seems to be the solution. Communication between SDFs and staff divisions in municipality is not taking place as it should.

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## CONCLUSION

This article sought to report on the general status of technical skills in local, district and metropolitan municipalities in all nine provinces of South Africa. A comprehensive profile of the skills base of employees in technical positions was obtained to pinpoint skills development challenges, and to make recommendations regarding addressing potential skills gaps. It is evident that skills development of technical staff in municipalities is a multifaceted process. It consists of a series of actions requiring the interaction between employees, supervisors, senior management, political representatives and various municipal coordinating structures. Training of technical staff to acquire the required skills and knowledge to perform their respective duties is a critical component of local government capacity building.

The technical skills audit conducted in the local government sector revealed that significant systemic challenges exist. In general it is clear that the current municipal skills development arrangements have not yet succeeded in providing major positive results concerning the development of an effective and efficient local government service as exemplified by the number of protests and court cases regarding service delivery. Furthermore, the necessary institutional capacity (i.e. structures, systems, strategies, programmes, resources) as well as policy framework require serious attention to support all skills development initiatives. It is therefore encouraging that the LGSETA invests in building the necessary capacity of technical staff at the coalface of service provision. A comprehensive framework for local government skills development should be developed which underscore lifelong learning, ethical norms, and skills and knowledge improvement. It is equally important to ensure that technical staff acquire the necessary skills and value base to perform the functions assigned to them. An equally important requirement for efficiency and effectiveness of municipal service delivery is the cultivation of a culture of commitment to the cause of the public service, namely the improvement of the living conditions of society.

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