



Unemployed job seekers at an Sishelo Border Industry Factory, KwaZulu-Natal 1983
 Credit: Nanyindica Media Centre

Working with South Africa's employment services – EMPLOYERS' EXPERIENCES

A study on employers' experiences and attitudes to the Employment Services of South Africa (ESSA) recommends the introduction of a far more sophisticated online ESSA platform and better coordination with the Department of Labour, writes Fabian Arends.

Public employment services (PES) represent key labour market policy instruments that governments all over the world use to facilitate employment. Their core function is to match job seekers with employers by facilitating access to and information sharing between organisations with vacancies and people seeking general employment. In South Africa, the Employment Services of South Africa (ESSA) have been designed to play this vital intermediary role.

In a recent study, we analysed a survey which canvassed employers' attitudes to, interactions with and experiences of ESSA. The survey was supplemented by interviews with managers of ESSA labour centres and a brief desktop study to place the South African experience in an international context.

Employers' use and perceptions of ESSA

In terms of the scale of use, a number of salient results emerged from our survey. For recruitment purposes, employers use ESSA as one of several channels, ranging from the formal to the informal.

A slight majority of respondents (30.6%) do not post all their vacancies on ESSA. Employers also perceive information about intermediate and low-skilled workers, Public centres, which are required to list all their vacancies on ESSA, predominantly need to recruit high and intermediate-skilled workers, but ESSA has limited capacity to respond to this need, as the majority of work seekers are at intermediate and low-skilled levels.

In terms of the effectiveness of job matches, we observed that the majority (56%) of successful matches made through ESSA result in long-term placements.

In terms of employers' perceptions of future improvements, employers who participated in the survey were accustomed to accessing ESSA services

online via labour centres. However, employers signalled the need to improve the system through assisting work seekers to prepare for job searches and interviews. According to the employers, this can be achieved through programmes to improve employability, and by screening of candidates.

These trends led us to explore how these patterns of employer behaviour impact on the quality of ESSA's administrative data and, by extension, its utility for skills planning.

Value of employment services for skills planning

Our research suggests that the ESSA system should remain committed to low-skilled worker hires. The system already has a preponderance of low-skilled vacancy registrations and work seekers, and has proven less effective in addressing medium or high-skilled vacancies. A focus on job placements for those who are most vulnerable is a critical role for ESSA.

If ESSA generates quality data in this regard, it can inform skills planning for the unemployed — a dimension that is often neglected in favour of a focus on forecasting, shortages, scarce and critical skills.

To ensure more effective data, the introduction of a far more sophisticated online ESSA platform is highly desirable. Many ESSA clients have access to the technology necessary to utilise such a system, which could also create substantial savings in transaction costs while improving the ability to monitor employment data.

It is however, important to note that many potential users do not have access to computers, and few labour centres have their own workstations that clients can use. It is critical, therefore, that information generated at labour centres is captured electronically on the ESSA electronic platform. This will ensure the consistency, accuracy and viability of labour market information generated through the ESSA platform.

The Employment Services of SA (ESSA) system and skills planning

Reporting to the Department of Labour (DoL), the ESSA system is located in formal ESSA labour centres across South Africa. A centralised ESSA database comprises vacancy and work seeker information, which is either uploaded onto the system at the centres, which clients can physically visit (the predominant practice), or accessed through the less popular ESSA website.

While the ESSA system is still in its development phase, in theory it should fulfil two major skills-planning and employment functions:

- Contribute substantially to match labour demands with supply through acting as a formal intermediation mechanism. To this end, the success of the ESSA service depends on increasing the number of job opportunities and work seekers registered across the spectrum of occupations, from low-level to intermediate and high-level skills.
- Depending on the quality of the information on the system, ESSA data should offer insights into the specific characteristics and attributes of the user population.

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