



Structural inequality still characterises work in the mining sector

The South African mining sector has traditionally been a labour-intensive sector. However, to keep abreast with global competition, there has been an increase in the shift towards mechanisation and automation – a shift that holds implications for the skill and competency requirements in this sector, write *Angelique Wildschut* and *Tamlynn Meyer*.

The shift towards mechanisation and automation in the mining sector is having an impact on the demand for different occupational groups. There are those who anticipate the increasing employment of high-skill workers, while some assert that intermediate-level skilled labour will be negatively affected by the introduction of technologies operated by semi-skilled or unskilled workers (de-skilling).

growing trend to employ higher- (professional) and lower-level (clerks and elementary) occupational categories. Table 1 shows that there was also an increase in intermediate-level occupations, but this growth was much slower in comparison. These trends would support both the high-skill and de-skilling hypotheses.

The mining sector suffers from a history of inequality and instability.

The mining sector plays a significant role in the labour market, both in terms of employment and revenue generation, but it suffers from a history of inequality and instability that have a negative effect on investment and growth. This volatility was recently highlighted by strike action that not only spanned an extended period of time, but was also violent in nature. In this regard it is clear that an important future research area will be to better understand the sociological drivers of labour market change, which is increasingly acknowledged as having critical implications for our country's economy.

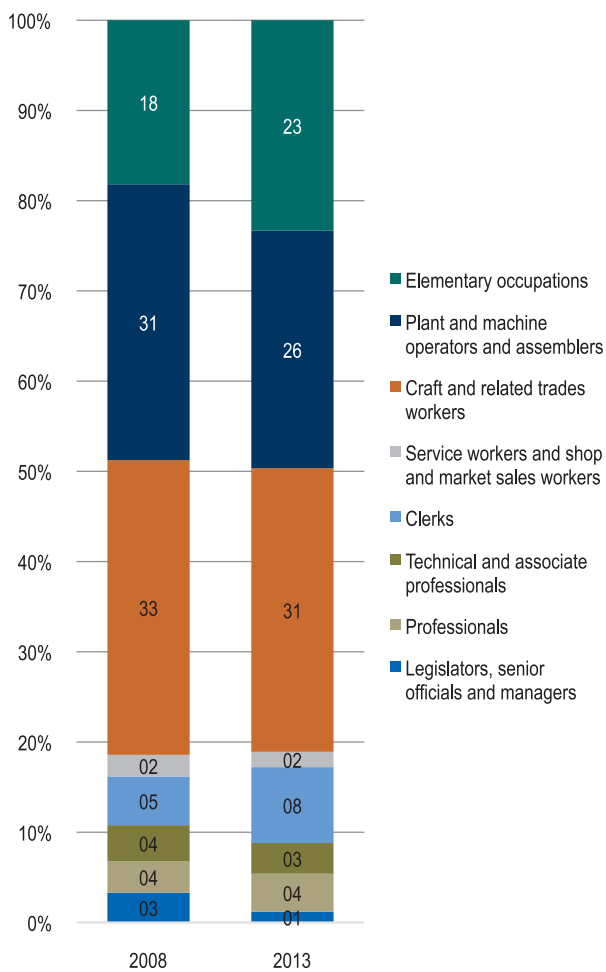
Data from a recent study by Wildschut et al. on artisanal occupational milieus and identities indicated there was a

Table 1: Employment according to major occupations in the mining sector (2008–2013?)

Main occupations	Average annual growth rate 2008–2013 (%)
Legislators, senior officials and managers	-11.9
Service workers and shop and market sales workers	-2.4
Technical and associate professionals	0.5
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	1.0
Craft and related trades workers	3.4
Professionals	6.9
Elementary occupation	8.0
Clerks	11.8
Total	3.6

Source: HSRC 2014

Figure 1: Employment according to major occupations in the mining sector (2014)



Source: HSRC 2014

The sector's history dictates unequal relations between occupation groups based on gender and race.

Unequal relations between occupational groups

The trend towards increased employment of high-skill occupations, as opposed to intermediate-level skills, deserves some attention. This is not necessarily a problem, but the relation between high- and mid-level occupations has historically been contentious in the sector. Not only does a large earnings gap exist, but the sector's history dictates unequal relations between the two occupation groups, based on gender and race. Qualitative data reveals that this relationship continues to be characterised by racial and gender inequalities that contribute to the maintenance of occupational hierarchies.

Trends such as these have implications for labour relations in this sector. However, rather than reverting to the traditional characterisation of labour unrest relating mainly to wage disputes, it is time to elevate the discussion to other factors, namely how structural inequality perpetuated in the workplace can be better identified and addressed. Studies on occupational milieus and identities have the potential to do so in allowing for the examination of the underlying sociological drivers of labour market change – issues such as culture, discourse and work identities associated with a particular occupation.

The study illuminated structural inequalities between occupational groups in the sector.

Under such an overarching theme, the study on artisanal occupational milieus and identities focused on studying the nature and shifts in boundaries between occupational groups. Thus, in facilitating an exploration of not only the extent but also the nature of change in the demand and supply of skills, the study also illuminated structural inequalities between occupational groups in the sector. Consequently, rather than just identifying the location and existence of structural inequalities in the labour market, the study allowed a better understanding of the underlying factors that continue to drive structural inequalities between occupations. ■

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