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**The Erosion of Skills in the western cape: Substance Abuse trumps HIV in the workplace**

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**DISCLAIMER**

This article was submitted previously to the University Stellenbosch as an assignment for partial fulfilment of an MPhil in HIV / AIDS Management degree.

## **ABSTRACT**

*Erosion of skills was chosen as the research topic. Companies become vulnerable when the workers in critical jobs are absent or need to be replaced. Critical jobs can be identified by the skills audit that looks at the organisational characteristics and is essential to estimate the liabilities of an organisation. The Cape Coloureds are friendly, loyal staff, but burdened by a long history of chronic substance abuse, mainly alcohol. Alcohol use disorder dates to three hundred years when the slaves worked on the wineries and received wine as part of their wages. Substance abuse is significant in the prevalence of HIV and AIDS. The research problem was defined as the erosion of skills in rural areas of the Western Cape.*

*A participatory philosophical assumption was used. Due to the understanding of lived experiences, phenomenology served as a philosophy and a research method by exploring a concept and the profile of the phenomenon was constructed as descriptive research.*

*Substance abuse had a higher impact on the erosion of skills in the workplace than HIV and AIDS. There is a recognised need to manage erosion of skills in the workplace. Substance abuse and HIV are contributing factors and should be prioritised and addressed on a different level in the workplace. Contemporary employee assistance programs should be employed to mitigate unemployment and poverty in the rural areas of the Western Cape.*

KEYWORDS: erosion of skills, critical jobs, HIV and AIDS, alcohol use disorder

## **INTRODUCTION**

The retail store that was analysed is in a rural area in the Western Cape and the local community belongs to an ethnic group commonly known as Cape Coloureds. The majority speak Afrikaans and they grew up in the local community. The remaining people in the community are from Xhosa, Zimbabwean and White backgrounds.

The Cape Coloureds are friendly, loyal staff, but burdened by a long history of chronic substance abuse, mainly alcohol. Alcohol use disorder dates to three hundred years when the slaves worked on the wineries and received wine as part of their wages. This tradition continued even after new legislation in 1961 prohibited the practice. Farmers could reward workers with alcohol provisions. The legacy of the so-called Tot System, also known as *Dop System* had a lasting impact on the communities. People with alcohol abuse disorder are associated with violent, risk-taking, harmful and problematic behaviour. Alcohol consumption can result in women giving birth to children with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder. One of the long-lasting consequences of *Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder* are elevated unemployment rates in the Western Cape and an additional economic burden on the community.

These co-morbidities are significant in the prevalence of HIV and AIDS. HIV infections are related to substance abuse. Violence, substance abuse, malnutrition, orphans and vulnerable children, leads to a higher susceptible community. The alcohol abuse and malnutrition may also result in a rapid progress from HIV to AIDS. Alcohol abuse is related to risky sexual encounters and the transmission of HIV.

Mobile workers such as farm-workers, truck drivers and construction workers also live in the

smaller communities. The high prevalence of HIV amongst the mobile workers is also a great concern for the community. Due to extensive roadworks, these communities are exposed to the construction workers. Some women supplement their income with transactional sex at the living quarters of the road-workers. Truck drivers also pass on the highways and some truck drivers may overnight in the smaller towns. The truck drivers are also part of a high-risk group, attracting women and spreading HIV infection. There are no significant groups of sex workers, but the local women and young girls will exchange sex for money, food, alcohol and favours. There are also seasonal farm workers in the neighbouring fruit and wine farms.

HIV and substance abuse affect the skilled workers. Companies become vulnerable when the workers in critical jobs are absent, being laid off or quit. Critical jobs can be identified by the skills audit that looks at the organisational characteristics. The audit is essential to estimate the liabilities of an organisation. In the following section, an overview on substance abuse and HIV will be discussed as part of the institutional audit by the human resource manager. The institutional audit includes the internal talent search, workflow diagram and identification of critical jobs.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The company's predisposition for HIV and substance abuse with the negative consequences should be included in an institutional audit. Firstly, review the predisposition or susceptibility is the environment that creates favourable conditions for viruses such as large groups of mobile workers in isolation, overcrowded hostels away from their home and families (IOM, 2003:12). Secondly, analyse the vulnerability of the company and the negative impacts that high morbidity and mortality may have on the operations of a company (Barnett et al., 2002).

Thus, how easy will it be to retain workers if the environment at work changes and are there are competitive markets where they can apply. How long will it take to replace employees; advertising is expensive and recruiting agencies also require a percentage of the salary. Technology and offshoring play a more significant role and with enough capital it could replace skilled workforce with resulting unemployment (DeCenzo, Robbins and Verhulst, 2010:21).

Furthermore, the time that it will take to orientate and train a new candidate in her job should be calculated using both the trainer and the candidate's salaries for that period. If the candidate decides to leave in the probation period, the process starts all over again with escalating cost (DeCenzo et al., 2010:138).

As a result, even after orientation, the new candidate may still shadow a worker until they are confident in their work. Furthermore, the company size also plays a role, whether a company is large enough to let workers rotate and acquire new skills (Barnett et al., 2002:22–26). Consequently, a vulnerable company will experience lower economic activity. Absenteeism affects productivity, organisational disruption and loss of tacit knowledge.

The audit should also include a summary of underrepresented minority groups to ensure a balanced workforce (DeCenzo et al., 2010:35). The HR department should not only focus on distinct minority groups such as women. Consider jobs that can be performed by disabled members of the community such as people living with foetal alcohol syndrome. The Western Cape of South Africa is burdened with a high prevalence of the syndrome (Olivier, Urban, Chersich, Temmerman and Viljoen, 2013:402–405). The work may include repetitive work that other workers may find annoying. The company should also guard against reverse discrimination; the company could very easily overcompensate in an effort to comply with regulations (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart and Wright, 2015:133–114).

Workers also represent the social capital of the company and that of the broader community and the country (Smith and Rimal, 2015:1–12). Many of the HIV interventions focus more closely on the health of the individual. However, the socio-economic environment and the impact that HIV has on the patient's extended family are often neglected. Parents with AIDS leave orphaned. The company may even encourage families to join the organisation, therefore, strengthening the employee's relationship with his family. Close relationships may prevent the worker to seek the company of sex workers. The GAP Report by the UNAIDS pointed out that 75% of women who are HIV-positive, had a migrant husband (UNAIDS, 2014:73).

Furthermore, the larger the environment, especially with migrant workers such as construction and farmworkers usually includes sexual networks (Selvester, Cambaco, Bié and Mndzebele, 2012:26). When the sexual networks are excluded from the audit, a crucial link to the epidemiology of HIV and AIDS are disregarded. A survey should also be conducted to estimate the prevalence of HIV amongst the sex workers in the community that serve migrant workers.

An estimation should also be made to determine the number of injection drug users amongst workers, the higher the prevalence of injection drug users, the higher the prevalence of HIV amongst the workers (UNAIDS, 2014:93). Alcohol abuse is also a known risk factor for HIV transmission according to research in South African townships and should also be in the audit (Lane, Shade, McIntyre and Morin, 2008). High-risk sexual practices are prevalent amongst people with limited knowledge on HIV and substance abuse (Bekker, Rebe, Venter, Maartens, Moorhouse, Conradie, Wallis, Black, Harley and Eakles, 2016:3). The International Labour Organization considers substance and alcohol abuse as a general health issue in people living with HIV (ILO, 2001:12). Selvester et al. (2012) offer a detailed description of a sample survey in their report that can be utilised by a company.

Restructuring is, “a reorganisation of a company with a view to achieve greater efficiency and profit or to adapt to a changing market” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017). This definition holds true in an HIV or substance abuse epidemic. During talks, such as in the case of a new epidemic, an organisation needs to plan strategically. Goals and objectives need to be articulated to confront the changes in the company. Consequently, this may lead to structural changes within the enterprise to align with the new vision of the organisation. HR officers need to revise their

recruitment strategy and do talent surveys to determine the skills within the company (DeCenzo et al., 2010:137).

The talent search that was compiled during the audit can now be applied to revise and restructure the different competencies in the business. Employees that are infected could be reapplied in a less demanding position that is not as physically taxing as their previous jobs. On the other hand, workers that bored by routine work may want to get out and do more hands-on labour (DeCenzo et al., 2010:35).

However, before the HR department embarks on revising and restructuring the company policies, they should familiarise themselves with accurate job descriptions. A detailed breakdown should be made for each task; the steps in every process should be recorded. The critical skills within every job description should be highlighted in bold. The breakdown of the job descriptions will expedite the recruiting process and enable the recruiter to select the right candidates for the job by determining the cut score for the new candidates (DeCenzo et al., 2010:36). Moreover, it will also assist the company when automation and outsourcing are considered as part of the restructuring process to increase the output of the group (Noe et al., 2015:162).

The workflow analysis should be performed and can be translated into a simple diagram that makes it understandable for everyone in the workforce. The process of workflow design should be a logical set of tasks that should be arranged in a way to limit cost as well as physical labour. Time-saving processes should also be employed in the workflow and bottlenecks should be sorted out and prevented to increase the output of the company (Noe et al., 2015:161).

The institutional audit, talent search, identification of critical jobs and workflow diagram are crucial in an environment with a high burden of HIV and substance abuse.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **1. The Research Topic**

Erosion of skills was chosen as the research topic.

### **2. The Research Problem**

The research problem was defined as the erosion of skills in rural areas of the Western Cape.

### **3. The Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of the study was to determine the possible cause of the erosion of skills in the workplace. Furthermore, to fill the knowledge gap in the understanding of ethnic groups in the Western Cape in the context of the workplace.

### **4. The Research Questions**

The resulting research questions that flowed from the research problem was:

- 4.1 To what extent are there erosion of skills in the rural areas of the Western Cape?
- 4.2 Do HIV and AIDS play a role in the erosion of skills in the workplace?
- 4.3 What other factors impact on the erosion of skills in the Western Cape?

### **5. The Qualitative Research Approach**

A qualitative research method was utilised in this study with the view that quantitative and qualitative research lie along a continuum opposed to being direct opposites (Creswell, 2012:xvii). The research was an understanding of a phenomenon with a supporting literature review. In this qualitative research, the participant's experiences were accommodated in the broad and general research questions and the purpose statement. The essence of the participants' views was captured. The broader meaning was analysed through the data and interpretation. The evaluation and conclusion included the researcher's subjective reflexivity and bias (16). Very little research has been done in the Western Cape on the impact of HIV versus substance abuse in the workplace and therefore merits phenomenology as a qualitative research (18).

### **6. The Research Philosophy**

Researchers concluded that the constructivist viewpoint did not support marginalised people enough in an action agenda (Creswell, 2009:9). Therefore, a participatory philosophical assumption was used and Denzin and Lincoln suggested that this philosophy can also be regarded as advocacy or a basis for social justice theories (2011:11).

### **7. The Research Strategy**

Due to the understanding of lived experiences, phenomenology served as a philosophy and a research method by exploring a concept (Creswell, 2009:9, 98). The profile of the phenomenon was constructed as descriptive research (64).

A purposive sampling method was used for managers from a large retail store. The cross-sectional study included unstructured face-to-face interviews with the managers a store in the Western Cape. An anonymous survey was done with the AIM-B impact prediction software from Futures Group

to analyse the collected data of workers in the Western Cape (2015). The African Center for HIV and AIDS at the University of Stellenbosch validated the AIM-B impact prediction software tool.

Some of the ethical considerations were confidentiality and anonymity for the workers and the store. According to Chapter Two of the Constitution of South Africa (1996), all citizens of protects vulnerable groups. Permission was obtained after the terms of confidentiality was negotiated.

## **RESULTS**

The AIM-B impact prediction software takes into consideration the demographics of the industry and the average HIV prevalence for each group; the numbers can be estimated by anonymous testing. The number of employees at different skills level in the company and each skills group's salary should also be entered. Recruiting new skilled candidates may require the business to place an advertisement in several newspapers and paying recruitment agencies. However, unskilled workers are no cost to the total expenses of the business, as they are easy to replace and can be recruited by word of mouth or outsourced to an agency. Health benefits can amount to a substantial expenditure, especially with a chronic disease such as HIV and AIDS. Funeral cost and death benefits should also be calculated in the AIM-B software. However, with the new combination antiretroviral treatments available, fewer worker perish from AIDS-related diseases and may not be such a significant liability as in the previous decade. With all the numbers submitted, the software will calculate the annual cost for the company.

Unskilled workers can be replaced with almost no cost to the company. The store has a long waiting list for potential workers and they also recruit by word of mouth. It is a small community and the staff knows every applicant by name and it is easy to get references and recommendations from within the staff. The estimated amount for recruitment in the AIM-B model was less than 500 ZAR, based on the low advertisements costing between for vacancies in the weekly local newspaper. The interview will also be short, it takes more time to finalise the paperwork. The training was calculated on a two-week salary for the trainer and trainee.

The skilled workers are also recruited by word of mouth and advertisements in the local newspapers. The store rarely uses a recruiting agency; it will cost less than 3,000 ZAR if they do put a small advertisement in a more prominent newspaper. The skilled staff are recruited and selected from the experienced staff, some coming from other retail stores; they do not have to learn a new skill, they are only orientated in their unfamiliar environment. A two-week adjustment period was calculated in AIM-B.

The retail store is the most significant employer in the town and also pays the best salaries in the district. According to the recommended table, the store pays the same rates as the city stores. The store has no problem recruiting new candidates. The region also has a very high unemployment rate, thus making it easier to recruit new staff.

All the calculations, salaries, recruitment and training were made by first calculating the unskilled monthly cost. After that, the calculations were done for skilled staff. The total of skilled and unskilled was then divided by the total number of workers to get an average. The total of the monthly average was then multiplied with 12 to get the annual cost. The calculations may be overstated. The store does not pay any funeral benefits, the only cost is three days of compassionate leave for a close family member, plus the amount paid to the casual replacing the worker for the three days of companionate leave. The national average was used. Neither does the store provide health insurance for their workers. The annual cost to the company was therefore a neglectable amount.

During the unstructured interviews, the store managers revealed that the staff do not present or complain about any AIDS symptoms; the workers are also regularly screened for tuberculosis. The store owners do not know what the prevalence is of HIV and AIDS in the shop. There are many stigmas attached to HIV and the community knows that everybody in town gossips, therefore the workers are not transparent about their HIV status.

One of the first critical jobs in the store was identified as the receiving clerk. He can only be replaced by one of the managers, although he has no specific qualification. He needs to be sober, trustworthy with an unblemished character. He handles all the stock that amount to large sums of money. Other critical jobs are the block-man in the butchery and chefs in the bakery. Because of the high incidence of substance abuse, an employee may be dismissed for absenteeism, long before the person develops any symptoms of AIDS. Due to the strict labour laws, many workers lose their jobs because they stay home in December. In the earlier days, before the strict labour laws, they were sent back to work after being reprimanded, but now they are dismissed. The company makes use of labour consultants and they treat everyone equally.

A loyal, skilled worker may be reliable for most of the year, but binge drinks during the holiday season. It is unlikely that an employee will stay in employment long enough to die from AIDS because of alcohol and substance abuse. The store tried to implement additional bonuses to mitigate absenteeism during holidays with no success. The lack of purpose and low ambition levels associated with the chronic alcohol use disorder, results in staff staying away from work longer, the more they are paid. The workers with the disorder will calculate how much more they earn than their counterparts at other stores, then decide how many days they can stay home with the *unpaid leave*, even if the leave without pay was not requested or granted. Any extra money will also be translated as more money for alcoholic drinks.

The South African Department of Health's report (2013), stated that 55.8% of women presented with HIV in antenatal clinics in the Western Cape, with HIV infection rates of 91.7% for the group between 45-50. Given the high levels of poverty, substance abuse and exposure to mobile workers, the prevalence of HIV may be higher in the town. The personnel below the age is about 30% and the staff between 25 and 50 makes for 50% of staff. The remaining 20%

is above 50 years old, although not less promiscuous than the younger groups. Therefore, the calculated 60% prevalence may be conservative for the region.

## DISCUSSION

The store managers have a few options to counter the effects of skills erosion. Talent search during the audit should explore hidden skills amongst the existing workforce. A database should keep records of these skills and can be sorted in a pivot table when needed. Many workers in unskilled jobs may have a specific affinity for another skill, a natural talent or even a qualification that is unknown to the HR department. It is possible that some of the workers applied for jobs only because the job was available at the time and they could not find a good paying job aligned with their skills. It may take a shorter period to train these workers or give them formal certification for work that they already can do, by putting them through a formal evaluation process. Jobs should also be advertised internally; it will save cost and more workers will be productive if they are content and rewarded in their jobs. A proper job analysis is therefore indispensable (DeCenzo et al., 2010:120).

However, before the HR department embarks on revising and restructuring the company policies, they should familiarise themselves with accurate job descriptions. A detailed breakdown should be made for each task; the steps in every process should be recorded. The critical skills within every job description should be highlighted in bold. The breakdown of the job descriptions will expedite the recruiting process and enable the recruiter to select the right candidates for the job by determining the cut score for the new candidates (DeCenzo et al., 2010:36). Moreover, it will also assist the company when automation and outsourcing are considered as part of the restructuring process to increase the output of the group (Noe et al., 2015:162).

The workflow analysis should be performed and can be rendered into a simple diagram that makes it understandable for everyone in the workforce. The process of workflow design should be a logical set of tasks that should be arranged in a way to limit cost as well as physical labour. Time-saving processes should also be employed in the workflow and bottlenecks should be sorted out and prevented to increase the output of the company (Noe et al., 2015:161). The initial steps in the workflow are to identify raw inputs such as materials; the equipment needed by the company as well as human capital. The workflow must be translated into the activities that combine the first three elements to ensure a production line. The activities are followed by the output; the final product should be analysed regarding the service provided and what monitoring and evaluation tools are available to ensure quality control (Noe et al., 2015:162)

The labour laws could be more tolerant in disciplinary procedures and policies can be revised for communities living with a high burden of substance abuse. The figurative *Procrustean bed* (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017) symbolises conformism; in Greek mythology, *Procrustes* the bandit, either stretched or amputated the legs of people who did not fit his bed; inflexible work policies are compared with the legendary *Procrustean bed*.

In the event of limited skilled workers, the HR department can use the job analysis to restructure the different procedures that need to be carried out. For example, if 20 skilled workers need to attain the same ten critical skills, a breakdown of the skills can be divided amongst 20 different people, two people each learning only one new skill. When combined, the company still have 20 people performing ten critical skills. The advantage may be that the skills can be acquired in a limited time; with constant practice, they will become masters in their occupations. Teaching two people the same skill also ensure long-term sustainability in the organisation. After that, the company can opt to rotate the skilled workers all they can do a survey to estimate how many workers do want to rotate; some workers prefer to be a specialist, while others want to be generalists and can be accommodated in the workforce. The generalist will be flexible whereas the specialist will ensure quality control.

Allowing rotations amongst workers will further enhance innovative ideas; a fertile ground for creativity will be created and will improve personal development and flexibility. Socialisation within the organisation during the orientation period will give the new workers a sense of belonging and they will be less likely to quit their new job. Teamwork depends on new worker's ability to adjust to the environment and familiar the new worker with the culture within the organisation (DeCenzo et al., 2010:36).

Moreover, the skills of retired workers can also be implemented in the store. They can be employed part-time, or they can provide training to the new candidates. If the experienced workers' technical skills are outdated, they can be coupled with a young worker. Therefore, the young worker can help of the mature worker to update her technical knowledge whereas the mature worker can share her tacit knowledge with the younger worker. Furthermore, she can also serve as a mentor to the less experienced worker and provide emotional support during the orientation period. They may also alter their shifts to accommodate both the employees. The mature employee can also motivate people living with HIV that started on antiretroviral therapy, to continue and to adhere to her therapy as part of the buddy system. With such a system in place, the company will also mitigate age discrimination (Noe et al., 2015:114).

During restructuring the store, the HR department should know technology, organisational structure and human resources are related. Failing to acknowledge that these three elements are integrated, may result in a company that does not operate at its full potential (Noe et al., 2015:53–56). Enterprises that fail to treat the workers ethically fail in the corporate world due to sanctions imposed by communities and will seep through to all levels of the company until it is too late to eliminate the dangerous consequences (Noe et al., 2015:44–45).

Although the store does not have a significant loss directly to AIDS, the cost to the society is very high. The real cost to the store is not reflected in the AIM-B model (Futures Group, 2016), but rather in their ongoing strategies to support efforts in the community to mitigate substance abuse and moral decline. The company's Corporate Social Investment is rightfully so directly to social upliftment in the region.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of the store has raised important questions about the impact of HIV on the workplace. The prevalence of HIV is high in the rural areas of the Western Cape. However, it seems that HIV has an insignificant effect on the workplace. The unstructured interview with the managers shed light on the unexpected results. Many workers are being laid off so soon in their career that they are unemployed even before they develop AIDS. Consequently, the community bears the responsibility of the unemployed and the burden of the disease. Another problem amongst the workers is children, siblings and other family members that live with foetal alcohol syndrome. It is a financial burden on the families as well as time-consuming. Moreover, people with mental disabilities are more susceptible to substance use problems (Carroll Chapman and Wu, 2012:1147). There are sometimes no caretakers to take over the responsibility and puts more strain on the only breadwinner and with times, the only sober family member. Unemployed community members also get involved with gangsters and drug-lords that cause workers to take time off from work to sort out these challenges. In a vicious cycle, the worker may then succumb to alcohol to numb the overwhelming feelings of helplessness. Substance abuse spirals down to risky sexual encounters and more HIV that may advance in AIDS.

Working under the influence also pose a physical danger in the store. Unfortunately, it is also the people in critical jobs that are most affected. The chefs work with hot stove and knives and the block-man with saws and sharp knives. Intoxicated workers are a hazard in the workplace especially in areas such as the kitchen and in the butchery. *The South African Labour Guide* advises employers to set individual limits for workers according to their occupation and the risk involved ( Erasmus, Claassen and Du Toit, 2017).

Employee Assistance Programs (EPA) can be a valuable tool for managers in these high burden regions. Companies worldwide showed promising results. The store can also incorporate an employee assistance program into their disciplinary program. Firstly, the EPA must become part of the store's policy and document as such. The supervisors then refer the employees identified with substance use disorder; employees may also refer themselves when needed. Finally, the cost benefits should also be considered by the store. Companies reported that on average they save well over 3.28 USD for every 1 USD spent on EAPs. However, companies and employees should have a privacy confidentiality agreement (DeCenzo et al., 2010:333; Noe et al., 2015:459).

Substance abuse should be treated as a high priority in the Western Cape. Other options should be considered. Firstly, it could be treated as an epidemic in the regions that are most affected. In the regions, most affected, additional provisions should be made in the labour laws to mitigate unemployment. Equity status should be given to the group known as the Cape Coloureds with a heritage of alcohol abuse to reverse centuries of dependence. Ethnographical research is needed in the Western Cape; a tailored solution must be sought to prevent

unemployment and social decay, but also to assist employees that are also desperate for a solution.

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