

Distinctive Interests of South African Employers to Enhance Employment Relations through Workplace Learning

Adeola Arotiba¹, Wilfred I. Ukpere^{*2}

^{1,2} Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, School of Management,
College of Business Economics, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

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ABSTRACT:

South African organisations and industries have been empowered through various workplace learning initiatives. Many organisations have consistently cultivated talents, upskilled their employees, competed effectively, and improved their BBBEE scorecards through workplace learning programs. Moreover, many organisations have established a high-quality learning environment, allowing for the supply of practical skills on relevant equipment and technologies through workplace learning. Consequently, numerous organisations have significantly increased in their human capital, performances, productivity, morale, attitudes, and skills that are necessary to meet market demands. In addition, workplace learning has produced financial benefits such as government grants, tax refunds, and reimbursements to many South African organisations. While the significance of workplace learning remains evident, the question is: are South African organisations offering and utilising workplace learning opportunities to improve their employment relations.

Keywords: Distinctive Interest, Employers, Employment Relations, Workplace Learning.

1. Introduction:

In the past 20 years, there has been a significant increase in interest in education, training, and development (ETD) practices in South African organisations (Erasmus, Loedolff & Hammann, 2010). This is evident as the South African government takes an active role in putting employee learning and development at the top of the national priority list. The implementation of workplace learning legislation, such as the Workplace Based Learning Agreement Regulations, Skills Development Act, and Skills Development Levies Act, are prompting organisations to reconsider their contributions to

skills development, education, and training (Erasmus, et al., 2010). Furthermore, the implementation of numerous systems, such as the South African Qualifications Authority Act which oversees the development, implementation, and maintenance of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in South Africa, National Standards Bodies, Education and Training Quality Assurers and Sector Education and Training Authorities and Quality Council For Trades & Occupations have also helped to address the country's skills crisis (Erasmus et al., 2010). Similarly, research conducted by the National Skills Fund (NSF) indicated a notable increase in

workplace learning in the 2023/24 financial year as R2 361 billion was allocated to bursaries and scholarships. R426 million was allocated to occupational programmes in TVET colleges. R67 million was allocated to skills programs development, which were primarily offered by non-profit organisations. R1 387 billion was disbursed to learners pursuing workplace-based learning (apprenticeships, learnerships, cadetships, internships, etc.), while R32 million was disbursed to workers education.

2. Literature Review:

The research conducted by Erasmus, Loedolff, and Hammann (2010) on learning trends and development practices across South African organisations revealed a substantial commitment to training and development, emphasizing the availability of training opportunities for employees. This study indicated that more than a quarter of the organisations that participated in their study had a large budget of over R500 000 for education, training, and development (Erasmus et al., 2010). George, Surgery, and Gow (2014) conducted a survey with 150 South African organisations, including the top 100 companies listed on the JSE and the top 25 unlisted companies on behalf of the National Business Institute, along with other state-owned organisations (SOEs). It was discovered that organisations in South Africa's private sector spend an average of 4% of their payroll on workplace learning. The mining industry spent the most on training, investing more than R385 million (USD 46 million), with an average of R15,693 (USD 1,882) per employee. The mining business was closely followed by the financial sector, which spent more than R357 million, with an average of R16,795 per employee (USD2,014). The manufacturing industry had the largest unit spend, with an average of R21,593 (USD2,589) per employee. The community and personal social services industry spent the least on training per unit, at an average of R1,809 (USD216). The average annual spend per employee across all industries was R12,839 (USD 1,539).

Despite this heavy investment in learning and development, Chelechele (2009) discovered a lack

of adequate workplace learning in the public sector, which is leading to substandard service performance in government organisations. Overwhelmingly, 66 departments in the South African public service reported a significant lack of skills, which resulted in a large number of vacant posts in government departments, a major factor contributing to the difficulty to filling these positions. Moreover, in terms of providing workplace learning and development opportunities in the private sector, a survey that was conducted in 1200 organisations in South Africa by Deloitte (an auditing firm, which explored top human capital development trends both locally and globally), showed that 38% of employees reported that they have opportunities for learning and growth in their respective work organisations, while 74% of South African organisations learn by using traditional methods without really empowering their employees with new skills and knowledge. Furthermore, the 2023 Deloitte Human Capital Trends reported that 56% of South African organisations indicated that a significant portion, ranging from half to all, of their employees would need to acquire new skills over the next three years to maintain competitiveness. However, it is concerning to note from the 2024 Deloitte Human Capital Trends that a mere 58% of organisations reported being well equipped in terms of providing learning and development opportunities for their employees and handling their career management.

Mavunga and Cross (2015) supported that many workplace learning programs in South African organisations are mostly designed for middle and senior management, while low-level workers are exposed to limited work-related learning opportunities that can facilitate their upward career mobility. It is said that though many of these organisations have impressive vision and mission statements pointing towards a successful future, the hope of realising it looks elusive as the learning needs of their low-level employees are neglected (Mavunga & Cross, 2015). This lack of attention for work related learning of low-level employees affects customers, suppliers, and distributors, as they are a critical interface for many organisations and their external

stakeholders. This leads to poor service delivery, as well as employees' dissatisfaction owing to a lack of opportunities for growth. Despite these challenges, the study conducted by Rabie, Cant, and Wiid (2016) indicates a positive outlook regarding the current state of learning and development initiatives within small and medium enterprises in South Africa, as a significant number of participating organisations engaged in formal business training. The top five training categories on the list include communication, people and social skills, customer service, computers proficiency, leadership, and strategic planning. Furthermore, Rajaram's research in 2017 corroborated these previous findings, highlighting the positive effects of training and skills development on the financial performance and sustainability of small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

Consequently, the adoption of workplace learning in South Africa has not been uniformly embraced by all stakeholders. This raises the critical question of whether the existing levels of workplace learning opportunities are genuinely enhancing employment relations within organizations. In this regard, Ntimba (2019) affirms that workplace learning, education, and training are significant social elements that influence employment relations in South African organisations. Finnemore and Koekemoer (2018) further maintain that the enactment of the Skills Development Act (97 of 1998) in South African organisations actually gave rise to workplace learning and skills development, which has resulted in improved productivity, service delivery, as well as the promotion of employability, as these benefits are observed in both public and private sectors, benefiting both employees and employers. Reddy, Wildschut, Luescher, Petersen, Rust & Kalina (2018) confirmed that the Skills Development Act (97 of 1998) has successfully bolstered investment in workplace learning, education, and training in organisations, leading to higher returns on these expenditures. The legislation has encouraged several organisations to create frameworks to foster workplace learning and enhance skills development.

Using these legislative frameworks, employers have transformed organisations into dynamic learning environments. They have given employees the chance to acquire new skills and have increased the employment prospects of young people entering the job market by providing them with work experience in organisations (Grogan, 2014b). They have encouraged information sharing and knowledge transfer (Ralphada, Coetzee, & Ukpere, 2014), as well as cooperation and team working influences amongst employees and, ultimately, productivity (Chetty, Bangalee, & Brysiewicz, 2020). Moreover, workplace learning programs in South African organisations are slowly reducing the disparity in participation and compensation between male and female employees (Kaggwa, 2020; Sindén, 2017). The employment demographic landscape in South Africa is undergoing changes as individuals from formerly disadvantaged groups are increasingly advancing up the corporate ladder owing to their increased skills and competences that are acquired through workplace learning (International Labour Organisation, 2019). Based on the International Labour Organisation's study regarding the situation of skills in South Africa, it is believed that the introduction of workplace learning, training, and education initiatives is effectively mitigating skills disparities and inequities across diverse ethnic groups within South African organisations (International Labour Organisation, 2019). Workplace learning initiatives have promoted and facilitated employee-initiated training programs provided by trade unions and workplace representatives, which have greatly helped to foster harmonious employment relations in several organisations (International Labour Organisation, 2019). Workplace learning programs have effectively addressed workplace discrimination, facilitated professional development for employees, and enhanced their skills in preparation for higher-level positions (International Labour Organisation, 2019). Consequently, several organisations have experienced reduced employee turnover rates, enjoyed peaceful work environments, diversity, and increased efficiency.

From many employers' perspectives, it is believed

that having a highly skilled workforce increases an organisation's competitiveness in the global market. Hence, workplace learning opportunities have enabled businesses and organisations to distinguish themselves from their competitors by providing exceptional goods or services supported through highly proficient employees. This has led to a rise in organisational profits and earnings, which has contributed to the long-term sustainability and expansion of the many organisations (Chami & Africanus, 2019). Therefore, many South African organisations are using their work skills plan as a tool for adding value to their strategic planning process. A 'workplace skills plan' gives organisations an excellent structured document that details concisely the strengths and weaknesses of the organisation's employees. The benefits of these on employment relations for many organisations is that it helps them to align their employment equity ratios to relevant legislations. This helps them to align their skills development implementation process with an effective employment equity execution process. In this respect, an organisation can utilise the skills development procedure to cultivate employment equity applicants, equipping them with relevant skills and knowledge within the context of their employment.

3. Methodology:

The research utilized a qualitative, phenomenological strategy to explore the distinctive interests of South African employers in using workplace learning to enhance employment relations. This approach aims to deeply understand everyday experiences of the participants and characterized by a systematic study of social phenomena. Fifteen participants from junior, middle and senior organisational levels were purposefully selected, with pseudonyms employed to ensure anonymity. Data was collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews, adhering to ethical guidelines that included informing participants about the study's purpose and ensuring voluntary participation.

4. Findings of the Study:

The study's research question was to know whether organisations are providing learning programs that are specifically designed to enhance employer-employee relations; and if such learning programs are executed at all levels within the organisation. Consequently, when participants were asked whether there are specific learning programs that their organisations offered to primarily enrich employer-employee relations, the following themes emerged from the participants' responses:

5. Workplace learning programs designed to enhance employer-employee relations

1. Leadership training programs
2. Team building programs
3. Diversity and inclusion programs
4. Transformation activities
5. Conflict management training

Labour relations training

Check in/progress review sessions

The themes are expounded in the sub-section that follows.

Theme 1: Leadership training programs

In respect of workplace learning programs that are designed to enhance employer-employee relations in organisations, leadership training programs emerged as a theme. Three research participants noted that their organisations provide leadership training, which is specifically tailored towards improving employer-employee relations

For instance, PM2 expressed her view in relation to this, and stated:

"We have leadership training, but you are required to be at management level in order (to) enhance crucial skills, boost productivity, improving decision-making, and fostering a more positive and effective work environment."

In concordance with PM2, PE2 remarked:

"We have training focused on leadership skills to improve our professional relationships."

PMF1 aligned with the above two participants, and explained:

"In my organisation, leaders identify potential leaders then they are taken for leadership development programs to provide training for those particular individuals. And obviously there is a cost benefit analysis and there is a mutual benefit for both the employer and the employee in this regard."

PF1 shared insights from the banking sector, and stated:

"If you're just coming into leadership, we don't just leave you dry. We have to take you through certain types of leadership development programs, and then once you move into an operational leadership or into a higher level of leadership, again you have to go through relevant leadership development training. More importantly, when you are at (a) strategic level, there are certain development trainings that you will be exposed to. For example, before you become a Chief Executive Officer of a company or if you at a particular executive level, you would have to enrol to one of the following Business Schools such as, Harvard, Oxford and Cambridge. You have to complete an executive management program or advanced management program. Depending on what your choice is, in order to gain a broad view about of your role, it's very critical that this is done."

PF1 further explained:

"This is because leaders influence development. An employee in a particular department may have a good experience when it comes to development, which may possibly influence his/her employment relations. That same employee can move to another department and have a negative experience of development, which can negatively impact on his/her employment relations. So, again, everything depends on leadership and that's why we try to drive leadership training programs to implement specific culture attributes of leadership so that we can consistently achieve good development experiences across each of our different business areas as best as we can."

In support of the views of other research participants, PF2 remarked:

"Primarily to ensure there is a smooth relationship between the employees and the management, my organisation has a management training programme, which is called Megan and Pipe that was designed by Megan and Pipe. This is where managers are equip(ped) with tools in terms of how

to engage with the employees. This programme primarily focuses on coaching and training management on how to relate better with their subordinates."

Theme 2: Team building programs

Another theme that emerged in relation to workplace learning programs aimed at enhancing employer-employee relations, was team building programs. Concerning this perspective, PM2 stated:

"We had an experience in January, where team building training was conducted between the main core leadership, which is our upper-level management down to the level of the operators. It was sort of a training so that the management levels can feel how to work on vehicles at the lower level besides sitting in boardrooms and having meetings."

The above view was reinforced by PF2, who observed:

"At times, we engage in off-site team building sessions to foster better connections among team members, as they may experience feelings of isolation. Overall, I believe that workplace learning interventions are effective, as some teams are thriving in their relationships with employees. This positive dynamic is so appealing that other employees are eager to join such teams, as they are drawn by the evident camaraderie and supportive atmosphere."

Theme 3: Diversity and inclusion programs

In the context of workplace learning programs tailored to improve employment relationships in South African organisations, diversity and inclusion also emerged as a theme. For instance, a research participant asserted that his organisation cultivates positive relations between employees and employer through its diversity and inclusion program. In his words, PMF1 stated:

"Yes, there were trainings that took place where everybody is included. For an example, training on diversity and inclusion. So, this training involves everybody, irrespective of where you are in the organisation. This is quite amazing; we had our executives and when I speak of executive, I speak of directors. Yeah, human resource directors, and

our managing directors. I mean people who take the most important decisions in the organisation. They engaged directly with the production line, and work with the people

on the floor, and before they do that, they had to go through rigorous training so that when they get on the line, they do not harm themselves and those around them, and that they know how to use the tools properly. And let me tell they were very much excited about it. And they had the best time of their lives learning, learning something new at that level. So, that should also tell you something about the type of leadership that we have within our organisation. It is a leadership that does not limit itself to learning."

Theme 4: Transformation activities

Transformation activities are another theme that emerged in response to workplace learning programs that are intended to enhance employment relationships. Lending his voice to this, PE2 remarked:

"We have transformation activities so that people from different backgrounds, different cultures and levels within the organisation can actually have an understanding for one another. This is organised in various departments, which has really helped with understanding and learning more from one another in the organisation."

Correspondingly, PE1 stated:

"We have activities, which we call transformation activities that are designed to foster cohesion among employees from various backgrounds and cultures. Also, to build a form of integration so that there is no segregation and everyone can come together. So, during this meeting, we learned a lot from one another while also getting to know each other better. This type of setup promotes change and social harmony in the organisation, and we are required to report on it annually. Then, the institution conducts an evaluation of how employees feel about the transformation effort. How can it be improved? What elements of the workplace can be transformed? And on and on"

Theme 5: Conflict management training

Conflict management training also emerged as a theme for workplace learning programs that are designed to enhance employment relationships. In line with this, PE2 remarked:

"Yes, disputes can arise at any level within an organisation, but we learn constructive ways to deal with them through our conflict management training."

In this respect, PF2 reported:

"Training on conflict resolution helps. I mean, short courses

on how to manage conflict or on conflict resolution. We do have programmes like this. Even though the focus of our learning is more on technical aspects of our work; however, we do have a learning and development team that helps employees on behavioural techniques and soft skills in terms of conflict resolution. So, we do have a team designated to focus on this type of training, yes, we do"

Theme 6: Labour relations training sessions

In response to workplace learning programs that are specifically designed to enhance employer-employee relations, labour relations training sessions emerged as another theme. Regarding this, PM1 declared:

"Yes, we have (an) employee relations program (ER) to make sure that there's a peaceful relationship between employer and employee. This is incorporated into the induction process. As a result, when employees return from their annual leave, they are required to attend induction, which serves as a refresher learning session. So, the induction process covers the enrichment of the employer-employee relationship."

Similarly, PH3 remarked:

"We have labour relations training programs that deal with how to relate with one another in the organisation."

In terms of employee-employer engagement sessions that are typically held at his organisation, PMF1 said:

"We have what we call RBO meetings, which means (a) Relationship Objectives Meeting. So, the union would bring all the topics that come from the employees and then of course the employer. I am part of the forum as well, and then we would come together and discuss issues that would improve the employee and employer relationship at all organisational levels."

Theme 7: Check in/progress review sessions

In response to whether organisations provide learning programs that are designed to enhance employer-employee relations, the theme check in/progress review sessions emerged. PF3 stated:

"My boss is my coach, so we have check-in sessions to discuss issues about my work, goals, and career advancement, which greatly enhances my employer-employee relationship."

Speaking from her experience in the health

profession, PH1 added:

"The daily, weekly, and monthly meetings we have as doctors in the hospital assist to foster a sense of respect for all of your colleagues. It also helps to trust the people that you work with and not only be confident in your own skills but also in theirs, which obviously leads to a better working environment".

Drawing on his experience as an intern at a mining organisation with a similar context, PMF3 articulated:

"For us, we have (a) monthly progress review; in our monthly progress review, we outline our challenges that we are facing and so on. In that way it helps the management to actually identify some of the issues that we are encountering as we go about our learning program, so that they can know what they need to fix to ensure the program runs smoothly. So, we not only outline the challenges that we faced, but the meeting also helps us in our relationship with the mentors and the management. They want to check what are the things that they need to improve on their side so that the relationship between us can be fruitful and ensure that the program runs smoothly".

The above analysis indicates that thirteen out of fifteen research participants reported that their organisations showed interest in implementing learning programs that are specifically designed to enhance employer-employee relations. For instance, some participants (PF1, PM2, PE2, and PMF3) specifically identified leadership programs as being a key component of workplace learning, aimed at promoting a positive work relationship at their organisations. Two other participants (PMF2 and PF2) recognised team building programs as a form of workplace learning, which are designed to enhance employer-employee

relations at their organisations. Another participant (PMF3) emphasised that his organisation fosters a positive relationship between employees and employers through its diversity and inclusion program. Furthermore, two other participants (PE1 and PE2) identified transformation activities as a learning initiative that promotes cohesion and enhances the relationship between employees and employers at their organisations. PE2 and PF2 highlighted the significance of conflict management training towards enhancing employment relations in the workplace, while three other participants (PM1, PH3, and PMF1) indicated that their organisations provide labour relations training, which is aimed at promoting a harmonious employment relationship between employers and employees. Similarly, two other participants (PF3 and PH1) expressed that their check-in and progress review sessions with their boss, colleagues, and management enhanced their employment relationships significantly. Nevertheless, the two remaining participants could not identify any specific programs that their organisations had implemented in this context, but they mentioned that their organisation does engage in training, not for the purpose of fostering employee relations, but rather that their learning programs are designed to promote employees' career paths, support their growth, increase productivity, and strengthen retention strategies, all of which are linked to enhancing employment relationships. These findings are presented in Figure 1 below

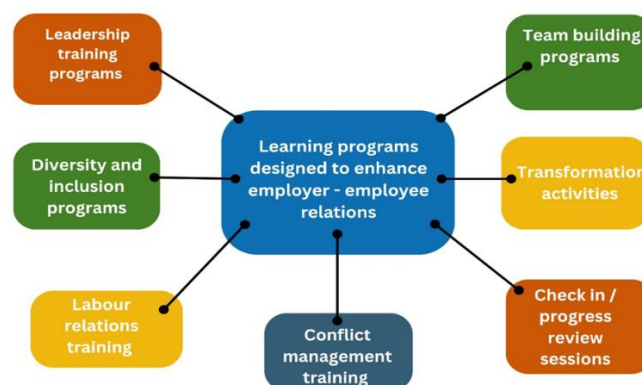


Figure 1. Learning programs designed to enhance employer-employee relations

Source: Author's fieldwork

The subsequent section delineates the research study's findings about the implementation of workplace learning programs designed to enhance employer-employee relations across all levels of

the participants organisations. The following organised quotes indicate the participants' perceptions in this regard.

Participant name	Interviewee's response
PF1	<i>Yes, every bucket in the organisation is deliberately exposed to these learning programs (PF1, Transcript, 5 February 2024, p. 10).</i>
PF2	<i>These trainings do cut across all the different levels in the organisation (PF2, Transcript, 16 April 2024, p.10).</i>
PF3	<i>According to the trainings I am aware of, I will say, yes (PF3, Transcript, 19 March 2025, p.10).</i>
PMF1	<i>Yes, we have these learning programs at different levels and departments. We have them with the production operators, indirect employees, and management levels (PMF1, Transcript, 22 February 2024, p. 10).</i>
PMF2	<i>These learning programs are conducted at all levels within the organisation - from the management level to the lower operator level (PMF2, Transcript, 28 February 2024, p. 10).</i>
PMF3	<i>These learning opportunities are available at all levels, from the floor operations to the management level (PMF3, Transcript, 22 February 2024, p. 10).</i>
PM1	<i>We have learning to enrich our employer-employee relationships across all the levels in the organisation, right from the learnership to the management level. But it differs with the qualification level of the employees (PM1, Transcript, 17 October 2024, page 10).</i>
PM2	<i>Our organisation's learning and development initiatives are carried out at all organisational levels and are not limited to certain levels (PM2, Transcript, 20 August 2024, p 10).</i>
PM3	<i>Different fields have structured different programs right from the bottom to the top in the organisation (PM3, Transcript, 17 December 2024, p.10).</i>
PE1	<i>They do go across all the levels depending on the needs of that particular level. For instance, the support staff get trainings that are specific to them; so, also lecturers, senior lecturers and professors they get trainings that are specific to them, as well as the management. So, the organisation try to accommodate everyone to make sure that everyone gets involved to achieve the requirements of their particular level. I would say these programs are actually helping to achieve a harmonious workplace relationship (PE1, Transcript, 17 December 2024, p.10).</i>

PE2	<i>Learning opportunities are there across all levels in the organisation and I think largely it makes a difference (PE2, Transcript, 2 May 2025, p.10).</i>
PE3	<i>Learning programs are probably for everyone at different levels in the organisation and usually I think you may need to apply through your line manager to basically give you permission to attend some (PE3, Transcript, 5 March 2024, p.10).</i>
PH1	<i>There is rarely no specific training to enhance employer-employee relationships conducted. Most of our learning programs are directed towards our specialisation in a particular health area (PH1, Transcript, 12 June 2025, p. 10).</i>
PH2	<i>There is no specific program to enrich employer-employee relations; it is all dependent on the department you are in, what are the learning opportunities available in the department. So, it is organisational dependent (PH2, Transcript, 12 June 2025, p.10).</i>
PH3	<i>Yes, all categories of nurses get to be exposed to these trainings.</i>
	<i>And they are HR led trainings. They are led by the HR division (PH3, 14 January 2025, p. 10).</i>

Source: Author's fieldwork

5. Discussion of Findings

5.1 Distinctive interest of South African employers to use workplace learning opportunities to enhance employment relations: This section discusses the distinctive interest of South African employers to use workplace learning opportunities to enhance employment relations. The study's findings showed that a majority of the research participants acknowledged that their organisations do implement learning programs, which are specifically designed to enhance employer-employee relations. As mentioned earlier, the study discovered seven significant workplace learning programs that reflect the unique interest of South African employers to use workplace learning opportunities to improve employment relations, namely leadership training programs, team building programs, diversity and inclusion programs, transformation activities, conflict management training, labour relation training sessions and check in/progress review sessions.

Leadership training programs emerged as a workplace learning initiative, highlighting interest

among South African employers to use workplace learning opportunities to enhance employment relations. In this regard, some research participants noted that their organisations provide leadership training that is specifically tailored towards improving employer-employee relations. PF1 shared insights from the banking sector, stating:

"If you're just coming into leadership, we don't just leave you dry. We have to take you through certain types of leadership training programs, and then once you move into an operational leadership or into a higher level of leadership, again you have to go through relevant leadership development training. More importantly, when you are at a strategic level, there are certain development trainings that you will be exposed to. For example, before you become a Chief Executive Officer of a company, or if you at a particular executive level, you would have to enrol to one of the following Business Schools such as Harvard, Oxford and Cambridge. You have to complete an executive management program or advanced management program. Depending on what your choice is in order to gain a broad view about of your role. It's very critical that this is done."

This further explains that in organisations, new,

aspiring, and experienced managers participate in leadership training programs to develop their abilities to lead motivated, happy, and loyal teams. This is because experience alone may not always produce the desired results, so formal leadership training programs help to improve leadership qualities. Therefore, regular leadership training programs are critical to ensure that leaders are effectively increasing their leadership capabilities and building a unique set of leadership abilities. Day, Bastardo, Bisbey, Reyes and Salas (2021) contend that leadership programs form a crucial element of workplace learning programs, designed to foster positive work relationships in organisations. This is because leadership training programs encompass various competencies such as communication, strategic planning, decision-making, team management, preparing individuals for leadership roles, and contributing to organisational success (Day et al., 2021). Burke and Collins, (2005) point out that different methods may be utilised to address the learning needs of managers, including seminars, management training, executive coaching, and mentoring interventions. Therefore, managers and first-line supervisors can develop skills to motivate employees, recognise their need for emotional support, communicate goals, explore solutions, and adopt empathetic and supportive attitudes that facilitate optimal employee performance through leadership training. Thus, a leadership program is a key component of workplace learning, aimed at promoting a positive work relationship in South African organisations.

The participants also acknowledged that team building serves as a learning initiative aimed at improving employer-employee relations. In this light, PF2 remarked:

"We do engage in off-site team building sessions to foster better connections among team members, as they may experience feelings of isolation. Overall, I believe that workplace learning interventions are effective, as some teams are thriving in their relationships with employees. This positive dynamic is so appealing that other employees are eager to join such teams, as they are drawn by the evident camaraderie and supportive atmosphere."

This response aligned with Kriek's (2007) survey

study on teambuilding interventions in South African organisations, which found that organisations employ teambuilding to implement interventions aimed at improving interpersonal relationships, enhancing motivation, aligning with change initiatives, boosting productivity, providing direction, and resolving conflicts. Papohunda (2013) posits that effective team-building programs cultivate unity among employees. Without teams, employees are confined to their individual efforts; however, through teambuilding, workgroups develop into cohesive units that establish shared expectations to complete group tasks. Employees are able to socialise with one another and are psychologically prepared to work together to achieve organisational set goals (Omuya, Kungu, Mohungo, & Ong'anya, 2011). This indicates that team building helps to enhance team performance through self-development, positive communication, leadership skills cultivation, and collaborative problem-solving efforts (Mobolade & Akinade, 2021). It fosters an environment where employees can build trust, support each other, and appreciate individuals' unique contributions. Furthermore, team building facilitates the resolution of conflicts by enabling managers and employees to connect and to become more familiar with each other's personalities, thereby fostering the development of effective open communication among employees (Mobolade & Akinade, 2021). In keeping with the study's findings, organisations can utilise workplace learning such as team building programs to facilitate relationships between managers and employees, foster camaraderie, and contribute to cohesion and a positive working environment.

Moreover, the findings of the current study showed that diversity and inclusion training programs are recognised in the framework of workplace learning initiatives, which are intended to enhance working relationships in South African organisations. In this context, PMF1 articulated:

"Yes, there were trainings that took place where everybody is included. For an example, training on diversity and inclusion. So, this training involves everybody, irrespective of where you are in the organisation, which is quite

amazing.”

This finding echoes Leuhery, Padang, Puspitasari and Judijanto's (2024), study, which highlighted that diversity and inclusion programs are comprehensive and proactive organisational strategies aimed at cultivating a culture of inclusion that leverages the strengths of a diverse workforce. This is because diversity and inclusion programs encompass a wide range of elements, including race, ethnicity, cultural background, gender, age, sexual identity and preference, physical abilities, and values. These programs aim to foster an inclusive environment, where all employees are respected, valued, and empowered to contribute fully (Leuhery, Padang, Puspitasari, & Judijanto, 2024). In this respect, Ledwaba's (2024) study on diversity management strategies in South African travel organisations recommended diversity and inclusion training programs as a way of creating a more dynamic and positive work environment. This understanding corresponds with this current study's findings, indicating that through diversity and inclusion programs, South African organisations can cultivate empathy, reduce bias, and promote inclusive practices in the workplace. This will result in a more unified workforce, heightened innovation, improved employee morale and retention, as well as positive organisational outcomes such as increased productivity and profitability.

Transformation activities also emerged as being part of workplace learning programs intended to foster positive employment relations in South African organisations. PEI said:

“We have activities, which we call transformation activities; they are designed to foster cohesion among employees from various backgrounds and cultures. Also, to build a form of strategic integration that can foster better working relationships in the organisation.”

The current finding aligns with research conducted by Christou and Piller (2024), which found that transformation activities are aimed at making significant progress towards an organisation's desired future state. According to Fredberg and Pregmark (2022), transformation activities in organisations can take various forms,

including cultural, technological, structural, procedural, and workforce reforms. In terms of workforce reforms, this may imply the need for employees to learn and acquire new skills, which may be driven by organisational transformation efforts such as adapting to new technologies, market developments, or business models. Thus, effective workplace learning is a critical mechanism for facilitating successful and long-term transformation. Hence, workplace learning programs can assist organisations to develop a more cohesive, skilled, and engaged workforce. This will, in turn, improve performance, profitability, and competitiveness in dynamic markets.

Furthermore, the current study also found that conflict management training is implemented in organisations to provide employees and employers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and techniques to effectively manage and resolve conflicts in a variety of contexts. From this perspective, PF2 stated:

“Training on conflict resolution helps. I mean, short courses on how to manage conflict or on conflict resolution. We do have programmes like this.”

This finding was consistent with Mihaylova's (2020) study, which found that conflict management training is regarded as a highly effective method for addressing workplace conflict successfully. The study indicates that conflict management training offers benefits for both managers and employees. This is because training on conflict management helps managers feel more confident in their capacity to resolve conflicts with their team members in a timely and efficient manner, which helps to reduce conflict. Conversely, it fosters positive team dynamics by giving employees the confidence to voice their concerns about conflict (Liddle, 2023). The study of Haraway and Haraway (2005) showed that conflict-management and resolution training for managers and supervisors at all levels can improve work environments and reduce employee stress levels. Likewise, Leon-Perez, Notelaers and Leon-Rubio, (2016) showed that the execution of conflict management training can help to improve both employees' well-being and organisational

productivity. As a result, conflict management training can be recognised as an effective method of workplace learning, providing employees with key skills and strategies to effectively navigate and resolve organisational conflicts (Liddle, 2023).

Similarly, the study identified labour relations training sessions as workplace learning programs that foster positive employment relationships. In this context, PM1 articulated:

Yes, we have employee relations (ER) programs to make sure that there's a peaceful relationship between employer and employee. This is incorporated into the induction process."

This response indicates that organisations provide their employees with the necessary knowledge and skills to foster peaceful employment relations through labour relations training sessions. According to Bendix (2010), labour relations training sessions are programs that are designed to educate human resource practitioners, managers, employees and unions around employment related issues such as disciplinary actions, dismissals, performance management, incapacity issues, dispute resolution processes and relevant labour laws. These sessions improve workplace harmony through the provision of essential skills that enhance communication, promote mutual respect, conflict resolution and effective collective bargaining for both employers and employees. Therefore, by implementing workplace learning initiatives like labour relations training sessions, organisations can provide their managers and employees with essential skills for conflict resolution, communication, and adherence to labour laws. This will result in a more harmonious work environment by enhancing negotiation strategies, implementing fairer disciplinary processes, whilst fostering a deeper understanding of the rights and responsibilities of both employees and employers; ultimately, creating a cooperative environment.

In addition, the current study's findings also showed that a check-in or progress review session also serves as a workplace learning program, designed to enhance employer-employee relations. In this regard, PF3 remarked:

"My boss is my coach; so, we have check-in sessions to discuss issues about my work, goals, and career advancement, which greatly enhances my employer-employee relationship."

PMF3 also articulated:

"For us, we have monthly progress reviews; in our monthly progress review, we outline our challenges that we are facing and so on. In that way it helps the management to actually identify some of the issues that we are encountering as we go about our learning program so that they can know what they need to fix to ensure the program runs smoothly."

The findings support research conducted by Khan and Ukpere (2014), which described check-in or progress review sessions as scheduled discussions, generally occurring between a manager and an employee, intended to assess performance, discuss objectives, identify challenges, offer feedback, and strategize future actions. Pragmatically, the relationship between managers and employs is built on regular check-ins and progress reviews, this is because the purpose of check-ins and progress reviews is to boost employee performance, as managers can better connect with their teams, see problems before they escalate and adjust to new information and circumstances in a timely manner. The study of Giamos, Doucet and Léger (2024) emphasised the need for managers to make feedback a top priority to optimise performance. Khan and Ukpere (2014) further strongly recommended check-in or progress review sessions to harness employees' performance. Anvari and Janjaria (2023) concur that performance reviews and check-ins are effective ways for employees to obtain feedback from their bosses and to learn how they are doing in relation to organisational goals and expectations. This also applies to this study, as the findings revealed that check-in and progress review sessions serve as workplace learning initiatives to discuss issues related to work progress, goals, and career advancement, thereby improving the employer-employee relationship in organisations. These sessions proved to be an effective means to improve relationships between employees and managers by offering a direct channel for communication, feedback, and support between

employees and employers. They help to build trust and engagement, find and fix problems early, and give employees personalised advice that can make them happier and perform better.

Implementation of workplace learning programs designed to enhance employer-employee relations across all levels of the organisation

All fifteen research participants acknowledged that workplace learning programs that were designed to improve employer-employee relations are implemented at all levels within their organisations. They recognised the existence, functioning, and implementation of these learning programs. The results of the present study demonstrated that despite the implementation of these learning programs at different levels, there might be differences among departments or employee requirements based on their qualifications.

6. Limitation of the Study: This study offers strong findings, acknowledging its limitations as well. The data gathered from fifteen participants across various South African organisations reveals a level of subjectivity, which may not provide an accurate representation of the broader context of workplace learning experiences. The intentional design of the sampling method, along with its narrow concentration on five specific industries, presents additional constraints. Participants demonstrated insufficient understanding of theoretical concepts related to workplace learning, which required the researcher to provide clarifications. To mitigate potential researcher bias, commonly observed in qualitative research, reflexivity and bracketing practices were utilized as strategies. The results demonstrate the interest of South African employers to use workplace learning opportunities to enhance employment relations.

7. Conclusion: Through workplace learning, managers at various levels engage in leadership

training programs designed to enhance their abilities to cultivate motivated, happy, and loyal teams. These training initiatives are essential for developing effective leadership capabilities and fostering a distinctive skill set among organisational leaders. Participants also noted that team-building activities contribute to improving employer-employee relations. Additionally, diversity and inclusion training is integral to workplace learning, aimed at enhancing relationships within South African organisations by addressing aspects such as race, ethnicity, cultural backgrounds, gender, age, sexual identity and preference, physical abilities, and values. Such programs seek to create an inclusive environment where all employees feel respected, valued, and empowered to contribute meaningfully. Moreover, effective workplace learning serves as a crucial driver for long-term organisational transformation activities, equipping organisations with a more cohesive, skilled, and engaged workforce that enhances performance, profitability, and competitiveness in evolving markets. Conflict management training also plays a vital role by providing employees and employers with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate and resolve conflicts across diverse contexts. The study further highlighted labour relations training sessions that help to nurture positive employment relationships. Implementing these workplace learning initiatives enables organisations to impart critical skills in conflict resolution, communication, and adherence to labour laws, thereby fostering a harmonious work environment through improved negotiation strategies and fair disciplinary processes. Finally, progress review sessions are identified as valuable elements of workplace learning designed to strengthen employer-employee relations. They aim to enhance employee performance by allowing managers to connect more effectively with their teams, identify potential issues early, and adapt to new circumstances in a timely manner.

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