

SA graduates have unrealistic salary expectations

By  Abram Molelemane and Anton Ressel

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Internship can be an incredible stepping stone to a successful career. It is an unmatched learning opportunity, and time and again we hear feedback along the lines of, "I learned more in three months as an intern than in three years of study."



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When viewed as a learning opportunity first, a stepping stone to a possible permanent job second, and an opportunity to earn a bit of money third, internships and experiential work experience can be a very rewarding process. However, it seems that in South Africa this is not always how graduates view internship opportunities.

It seems for one reason or another that many South African graduates have unrealistic expectations of their first jobs, misconceptions which mostly revolve around what exactly they'll be doing and how much they'll be paid.

As a case in point, not so long ago we attended the Small Business Growth Conference in Cape Town, where we got the opportunity to promote our Graduate Internship Programme (GAP). That was where for the first time we met the owner of one the businesses registered with our site, Brian Mawdsley of InsideMan Media. We were shocked to hear what he shared regarding his experiences of recruiting through GAP.

Unreasonable expectations

Mawdsley explained how he was looking to hire an intern, and says after going through the process of short-listing and finally narrowing the list down to the top five graduates who met the requirements of the position he was offering, he was rather shocked to learn that most of them had unreasonable salary expectations that were way beyond the level of their work experience. In fact, most of them had no work experience whatsoever, but were still looking for salaries on par with far more experienced employees.

More and more business owners, especially those in the SME sector, are experiencing this dilemma, too. In fact, an article

written by one of the co-authors of this piece on job opportunities being plenty but the youth being too picky to seize them, resulted in a series of comments from both readers and business owners alike, expressing their frustrations at graduates with no work experience having unrealistic expectations when applying for jobs.

One reader said, "What these graduates should be saying is....'I don't know everything,... in fact, I know very little...but please give me a chance to start at the bottom and learn, and I promise I won't let you down, I won't demand, I won't strike, I won't steal, I won't be dishonest, I don't expect to be paid what some experienced person will be paid'. There are thousands who refuse to employ staff because of all the rubbish we have to put up with."

How to close the gap

It is clear that the challenge around unrealistic expectations and attitudes has led to many businesses avoiding the idea of hiring interns or providing opportunities for first time workers. If this attitude is denying access to job opportunities, how then can graduates or first time workers close the expectation gap?

Be realistic about salary

Do some background research on the starting salary for first time workers who are in the same industry as you. If you are applying for an internship, find out how much most interns earn in their respective fields of study. Think about your salary, but don't overlook an opportunity just because it doesn't quite match your expectations. In some industries, work experience is seen as so valuable that interns will work for free just to get their foot in the door.

Understand what is expected of you from day one

Your first few days on the job are a good time to find out about company salaries, training and development opportunities and career progression. If both parties are honest and transparent about their expectations from the start, it will help all to deliver on these expectations, resulting in a higher chance of long-term success.

Be patient

Regardless of a company's size or structure, employers want graduates who can fulfil a role, not run the company in their first 12 months. After investing in recruitment and training, they will probably expect to retain a graduate for at least a year before even thinking about promotion potential.

Don't be afraid to ask questions

If you're frustrated in a role and feel there is no room for promotion, don't sit in isolation. Ask your employer how they feel you're performing and what their promotion criteria is. By keeping the lines of communication open you will feel more confident in your progress and position at the company.

ABOUT ABRAM MOLELEMANE AND ANTON RESSEL

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