

BREAKING THROUGH, against all odds, into retail management.

Pilot project to increase learner retention



g r a s s r o o t s

Community Development Trust



A NEW APPROACH TO LEARNERSHIPS

While the mandate of the Wholesale & Retail SETA is to transform the workplace through its learnership initiatives, the potential of this vital nation-building task is halved by the fact that as many as one in every two learners fails to last the distance and drops out before qualifying. This is a sad loss to the sector and an unacceptable return on investment. The Wholesale & Retail SETA decided to try something new.

Could specific pre-learnership training in world-of-work attitudes and thinking deliver better results and make more of learners' potential? Would this improve the rate of learner retention and ultimately fill the scarce skills gap in the sector? The Wholesale & Retail SETA decided to test this premise in partnership with Grassroots Community Development Trust and launched a pilot project for 30 learners.

Grassroots was selected because this NGO arm of The Pacific Institute, South Africa had created world-of-work preparation processes which had, over several years, been highly successful. A very high percentage of the financially and educationally disadvantaged candidates trained by Grassroots for another sector had gone on to achieve an NQF4 qualification and subsequent employment in that sector.

During the period of the project, Grassroots:

- Recruited candidates from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds through its community-based networks in Alexandra Township and Diepsloot.
- Took them through the *Steps to Excellence*© curriculum.
- Worked with them, using skilled and passionate facilitators, helping them to apply the principles learnt in Steps to Excellence© to the tough circumstances of their daily lives, and developing in them healthy attitudes and right mindsets for the demands of the world-of-work and the retail industry in particular.
- Worked in partnership with Shoprite Checkers, their employment and training provider, to guide the learners through the 12 month learnership.

THE OUTCOME

When the pilot project ended, 73.4% or 22 of the 30 learners, had achieved their NQF4 management qualification through the Wholesale & Retail SETA. All were employed by Shoprite Checkers, 20 either as managers or trainee/designated managers, and two as supervisors. All were thus able to fill a scarce skills category. 15 of the learners had completed the programme in under 12 months, a first for Shoprite Checkers.



Looking forward to a whole new world of opportunity. Pilot project learners on their first training day with Shoprite Checkers.





WHAT WAS DIFFERENT ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

ONE OF THE REASONS CITED AS TO WHY LEARNERS DROP OUT OF ANY 12 MONTH LEARNERSHIP IS THAT THEY LACK THE LIFE SKILLS TO COPE WITH THE RIGOURS AND SETBACKS THEY ENCOUNTER.

The difference between this pilot project group and previous Wholesale & Retail SETA learners was the *Steps to Excellence*® education and the associated life skills training and mentoring they received prior to and during the learnership. This critical education and life skills training provided by Grassroots changed their old ways of thinking and helped them to develop a vision and goals for their lives. It also fostered resilience in the face of adversity and winning attitudes towards their chosen field of work.

Shoprite Checkers attributes the greatly improved retention rate achieved in this pilot project to these factors.

THE WORLD-OF-WORK LIFE SKILLS PREPARATION PROCESS IN DETAIL

1 *Steps to Excellence*©

Before any engagement with the learnership process the candidates were taken through the nine week *Steps to Excellence*© process. *Steps* is a version of the world renowned, extensively researched and credible *Investment In Excellence*© curriculum developed by The Pacific Institute and adapted for people whose first language is not English. This, along with on-going life-application training, equipped them with practical keys to self-efficacy and self-mastery such as:

- An internal locus of control and an increased sense of personal accountability, demonstrated by a mindset that says “If it’s going to be, it’s up to me”.
- Increased self-esteem and the belief “I am worth something”.
- The resilience and adaptability to handle and thrive on change.
- A “can do” attitude.
- Personal aspirations and clear goals leading to a happier and more purposeful attitude to their lives.

2 **Screening**

Once candidates displayed behavioural evidence of changed thinking and attitude they went through a pre-placement screening, the goal of which was to help them understand what the learnership would entail and assess whether it was in line with their own aspirations, goals and potential.

3 **Assessment**

While the Wholesale & Retail SETA only accepts young people who have already achieved a matriculation certificate, the education system has still not equipped many of them with the English comprehension and mathematical skills needed to meet the SETA’s entry requirements. Many applicants underperform in their assessments due to their extreme anxiety about passing a test they see as their only chance to escape their often dire circumstances. These factors have contributed in the past to Shoprite Checkers needing to interview as many as three people for every one found suitable for a learnership.

For this pilot project Grassroots approached the challenge of selection and assessment differently. Whilst their candidates were at a disadvantage educationally and economically, they were helped to cope with their fear of the test and to focus on their long term dreams and aspirations rather than on their desperate short term economic need for jobs. As a result their performance in the assessment was well above average.

4 **World-of-work orientation**

Finally, those selected were exposed to a two day world-of-work orientation which included such things as interview skills, work ethics, behaviour and etiquette, commitment and expectations and similar requirements for success at work.

The four steps described above had the purposefully cultivated side-effect of developing a strong sense of peer support and accountability in the candidates which stood them in good stead when the going got tough.

5 **On the job life-application training**

Once placed in Shoprite Checkers stores the learners were monitored throughout the year by the Grassroots team. Meetings took place every two to three weeks either in a group or one-on-one, with occasional telephonic contact when needed. The meetings reinforced life skills and built resilience in facing inevitable setbacks.

Where problems became overwhelming and learners faltered or “ran away”, the Grassroots team tracked them down, helped them to deal with issues, and if necessary, worked with Shoprite Checkers managers to remedy the situation. Such interventions were usually followed by a positive personal breakthrough.

As their self-confidence grew few interventions were necessary as learners were behaving more and more like managers and were able to work out issues for themselves.

AGAINST ALL ODDS

LEARNERS HAD ALL BEEN UNEMPLOYED UP UNTIL THEN AND WERE NOT USED TO THE DISCIPLINE OF WAKING UP EARLY, GETTING HOME LATE AND THEN WORKING ON THEIR PORTFOLIO OF EVIDENCE FILES TO COMPLETE THEIR ASSIGNMENTS. SOME HAD TO WASH AND IRON THEIR ONLY OUTFIT BEFORE THE NEXT DAY. OTHERS WERE TRYING TO SUSTAIN A HOME WITH NO MONEY AND NO WAY OF KNOWING HOW IT COULD CHANGE. ONE WAS PREGNANT.

GETTING TO WORK ON TIME AND THE HIGH COST OF TAXIS WERE CONSTANT PROBLEMS. TO HELP, SHOPRITE CHECKERS TRIED TO PLACE THEM NEAR TO WHERE THEY LIVED, SOMETHING THAT WAS NOT ALWAYS POSSIBLE. THE SMALL STIPEND THEY WERE PAID AS LEARNERS WENT MAINLY ON TRANSPORT.

NEVER HAVING WORKED THEY HAD AN UNREALISTIC EXPECTATION OF WHAT THEY WOULD BE DOING. ALTHOUGH THEY WERE TRAINEE MANAGERS THEY STARTED AT THE BOTTOM AND LEARNT ALL THE TASKS IN ALL THE DEPARTMENTS. ONE LEARNER LEFT BECAUSE SHE COULD NOT ENDURE THE TEDIOUS PARTS OF THE TRAINING SUCH AS PACKING SHELVES.

THE RETAIL ENVIRONMENT IN ITSELF IS CHALLENGING. IT HAS TRADITION, LONG HOURS AND WEEKEND WORK, ESTABLISHED GROUPS OF STAFF AND SET WAYS OF DOING THINGS. THE LEARNERS HAD TO EARN RESPECT AND PUSH THROUGH INTIMIDATING CHALLENGES.

THE EIGHT WHO DID NOT COMPLETE THE LEARNERSHIP WERE LOST EITHER BECAUSE THE ISSUES BECAME TOO MUCH FOR THEM OR THEY CHOSE TO PURSUE OTHER OPTIONS.

What learners said:

"We started from nothing, now we have a high standard as trainee managers. We had to create opportunities for ourselves. Grassroots told us, don't just knock, build a door."

"We had to work with people twice our age. Some who had worked there for 20 years said to me, you are a child, don't tell me what to do, I have a child your age. And in a year's time I will be their manager! So I phoned Grassroots and they helped me."

"We are starting to make a difference. Other people in the store are looking up to us and are proud of us. It didn't come easy."

"When we see people going through a problem and wanting to stop, we tell them, life doesn't stop just because one thing has failed."

"We had to fight. Without life skills training I would have given up."

"The first assessment put a lot of pressure on us. But later the assessments became second nature and we finished before everyone else."





What Shoprite Checkers managers said:

"They're absolutely brilliant. They came in here and just looked for problems to sort out."

"There is the pressure of accountability, having to understand and know everything that is happening in all the areas. These trainees are the ones to bring in change and knowledge."

Of a learner who would definitely otherwise have dropped out:

"He was way behind the others and needed to get credits. I checked his file. It was blank. He ran away and Grassroots brought him back. I told him he had potential and if I spent time with him I expected growth. Four months later he passed."

Of a learner who showed remarkable personal growth:

"He is moving from doing what he is told to thinking what is wrong and what needs to be done."



What life-application trainers said:

"Many came from squatter camps and were living with people who have no dreams or vision. So they thought like that. We taught them to change the way they thought so they could realise their potential."

"They had struggled, some for years, to find work and at first would have taken whatever they could. They were unaware of opportunities available to them and didn't know how to go about contacting people for jobs."

"We taught them to push through the difficulties and told them that there is no job where there are no problems."

"Reinforcing their confidence and the principles of *Steps to Excellence*© was very important. I would tell them, you want a job? Don't stop! "

WHAT DID THIS PILOT PROJECT DEMONSTRATE?



- EDUCATION IN THE *STEPS TO EXCELLENCE*® CURRICULUM IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENT. ONGOING LIFE-APPLICATION SESSIONS, EITHER ONE-ON-ONE OR IN GROUPS, IS ESSENTIAL FOR REAL AND LASTING CHANGES IN THINKING AND LIFE SKILLS, LEADING TO SUCCESS OF THE LEARNERSHIP OPPORTUNITY.
- Recruitment through a network of community based organizations and various other local character referees, including previously successful learners, helps to source candidates who, in spite of severely disadvantaged backgrounds and living conditions, have shown determination and integrity.
- Screening and preparation of candidates before sending them for the formal SETA assessments helps overcome anxiety and ensures that candidates come with the right motivation and attitude.
- A key to the success of this project was the fact that Grassroots and Shoprite Checkers store management kept in regular contact so that quick action could be taken when learners were experiencing difficulty.
- The quality of the involvement of store managers and Shoprite Checkers training department makes a big difference.



THE FUTURE

The Wholesale & Retail SETA and Grassroots aim for continual improvement in the future retention rate by perfecting all of these elements.

ABOUT GRASSROOTS

In 1999 The Pacific Institute, South Africa formed a Section 21 company called Grassroots Community Development Trust through which to channel its social responsibility initiatives. One of the key focus areas Grassroots chose was to use the *Investment in Excellence*® curriculum to help unemployed but employable young people to find ways of becoming economically viable.

Through learnership projects undertaken with corporate partners in the short term insurance industry it developed a successful model to equip formerly unemployed young people for the world-of-work. This model is now being rolled out into other sectors.

The Pacific Institute, South Africa is part of an international performance enhancement consultancy which addresses the attitudinal elements of organization transformation.

Represented on six continents and used by over 60% of Fortune 500 companies, The Pacific Institute's processes, notably its internationally acclaimed *Investment in Excellence*® curriculum, focuses on helping people think with better quality about themselves, their potential and their ability to make things happen. As a result of these interventions, individuals, families, teams, organisations and communities have been significantly affected for the better.





The Wholesale & Retail SETA had experienced internal transformation through a series of interventions with The Pacific Institute, South Africa. Being inspired by the exceptional benefits they had realised informed their decision to expose their learners to the same transformational process.

The Wholesale & Retail SETA Chief Executive Officer, Joel Dikgole, and his team were honoured by The Pacific Institute for their commitment to excellence. It was also an opportunity to celebrate some of the successful learners in the pilot project. Seen here are Joel Dikgole, his team and three Grassroots learners.

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