



Skills Development:

The Key to Prosperity

Skills development has been a trending topic lately, from Asia, to Europe, and Curaçao is no exception. Recent trends and reports indicate that availability of talent is a key component of long-term competitiveness of companies and nations. Companies are thus very much concerned with attracting, developing, and retaining suitable talent. This has been far from easy. It starts by training and providing the younger generation with skills, work ethics, education and training on a variety of levels. Skills development enhances both people's capacities to work and their opportunities at work, offering a broader scope for creativity and satisfaction in the workforce.

TEXT PRISCILLA LOTMAN

Skills development is the intended output of education and training efforts and it should be an enabler for growth. To improve productivity in the workplace and the competitiveness of our businesses, it is imperative that Curaçao improve the overall skills of its current and future labor force. As the Minister of Social Development, Labor and Welfare (SOAW) Ruthmilda Larmonie stated, "Skills, work ethics and proper remuneration will ultimately lead to a more productive economy." Together with the Prime Minister, Ivar Asjes, the Ministry of Education and various Public-Private partnerships, Curaçao is taking this issue head on.

Youth unemployment in Curaçao is at a staggering 37%; there is a significant mismatch between skills required by businesses and skills possessed by the labor force. According to Larmonie, work ethics and discipline have been on a decline. "To improve the

so-called 'talent mismatch' creative partnerships with educational institutes, workshops and training activities specifically focused on work ethics and skill development must be part of the plan."

A Skilled Workforce for Strong, Sustainable and Balanced Growth

According to the G20 report on "A Skilled Workforce for Strong, Sustainable and Balanced Growth," international experience has shown that countries that have succeeded in linking skills development to gains in productivity, employment and development targeted their skills development policy towards three main objectives. The objectives are: matching supply to current demand for skills, including availability of good-quality education; helping workers and enterprises adjust to change; and building and sustaining competencies for the future labor market.

Curaçao has the achievement of these objectives on the agenda. “No stone will be left unturned in the efforts of reaching these objectives and closing the gap between the demands of the labor market and the skills of the workforce,” emphasized Larmonie. “Short, medium and long term strategies must be implemented. The first step is a thorough assessment of the demand side and the status of the supply side.” The subsequent strategies must then be built around the assessment.

Brain Gain and Development

With the opportunity to study abroad, students are also faced with the question of whether to stay abroad or return to the island and be part of the local workforce once they have graduated. This decision is often weighed by student loans, salary levels and growth opportunities. Curaçao must create a competitive advantage to entice graduates to return to the island. There may be a gap in the skills of the graduates coming from abroad as well; however their experiences, education and broader world view are an important contribution to the island’s work force.

Incentivizing companies to hire youngsters is one of the steps. Labor market flexibility, which assesses the legal and regulatory environment faced by businesses in filling talent gaps, comes into play here. There is a need to increase the share of students benefiting from apprenticeships and traineeships with employers, as well as the ability of graduates to find suitable work in the labor market once they are ready to enter. Programs such as the “Lei di Bion, P.B. 1989 no. 74,” where youngsters are granted a position in a subsidized workplace, is part of the plan to reduce youth unemployment. The law offers the employer tax and social security reductions while allowing youngsters to gain experience. These programs and others currently underway certainly have had some impact. “However, it is also important that continuous assessment of these programs gets under way,” added Larmonie. Ensuring a return on investment of the programs and incentives, measured by an increase in youth employment, is a prerequisite to determine whether or not they should continue or changes need to be made to make them more effective.

Additionally, continuous education is a vital step in moving the workforce forward and in preparing the island for the future labor market needs. “The SOAW continues to make every effort to organize workshops and job training activities with a focus on work ethics and work attitude,” said Larmonie. She went on to say that the government, together with 10 large employers on the island, have agreed to set up a few projects using on-the-job training methodology.

Early Development

Research shows that 80-90% of a person’s brain develops by the age of three, so the first three years of a person’s life are truly the most formative. “The Ministry of Education is now also focusing on the 0-4 year old group,” Larmonie stated. “Early childhood education is considered as the most important foundation for the formal educational process.” The Minister of Education has placed pre-school education as a priority. This is the period where parents have a critical role. Research has also shown that it is difficult to catch up at a later age with the developmental backlogs that may have taken place during that age period. “It will take about two decades for these children to be part of the labor force, and though we cannot speculate what the needs will be in 20 years, we do need to start preparing our children for the future,” remarked Larmonie.

The Way Forward

The government has a vital role in initially funding and establishing effective technical and vocational education and skills development systems. According to Larmonie, “The ‘1000 hoben na trabou’ project, where three companies will start training youngsters on the job, is one of the steps the government is taking to increase youth employment and improve the skill of youngsters.”

A strong work ethic is vital to a company achieving its goals. Every employee, from the CEO to entry-level workers, must have a good work ethic to keep the company functioning at its peak. “Integrity, discipline and

a sense of responsibility are attributes that must be instilled in our work force, Larmonie advised. It is one of the key issues we need to solve now. Somewhere along the way we lost this, and we need to instill the training and guidance to bring this work ethic back to our youth.”

“Integrity, discipline and a sense of responsibility are attributes that must be instilled in our work force.”

Finally there needs to be flexibility and responsiveness of training institutions to match the evolving needs of industry, which are crucial attributes of successful skills development systems. We need to look towards the future to see where we would like to go, what the industries need in terms of skills, and then make sure our labor force is trained accordingly. As Larmonie stated, “Curaçao is an island with great opportunities, but we need to ensure that our sense of pride is reflected in the work we do every day. We need to go that extra mile.”



Minister Ruthmilda Larmonie