



ITS ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

GRADUATES - GA GONA TIRO!

There's a famous political ad from the UK in the 80s, used by the Conservative party in their election campaign to oust the ruling Labour party from power. It was a time of high unemployment and the ad, designed by Saatchi and Saatchi, showed a group of despairing people in an unemployment queue with the deceptively simple but stunningly effective slogan 'LABOUR ISN'T WORKING'. The ad campaign was successful, Labour lost the election and the Conservatives governed Britain for the next decade.

So elections can be won and lost on unemployment statistics and a dissatisfied workforce struggling to find jobs. And from my own experience I know that a period of unemployment is not only humbling but totally demoralizing. Though mine only lasted 6 months, the effects endured way longer. I had left my very good job in search of greener pastures only to find my reality was looking for work in an ailing economy with a depressed job market at a time when investors were scrambling to get as far away as possible from troubled South Africa. Not a smart time to move, you may say and you'd be right. But from the safety of my plush Sandton office, cushioned by the kudos of my executive management status, I thought the economy was just dandy and good fortune my birthright which would follow me wherever. Six months later I was reduced to waiting jobs (just a tad more humbling than actually doing nothing - even more so in your late 20's). I questioned my self worth, had no money, increasing debts, low self esteem and felt detached from mainstream, working society. During this period I added no value to man, beast, society or self. I was, in effect, on hold!

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Recently I witnessed a client who was conducting a large recruitment campaign block all candidates who had some form of tertiary education as he did not want to attract 'over qualified' candidates. Regardless, some university graduates working as cleaners and in other low-paid positions applied but their applications were not even considered. Others had taken Street-Smart 1 at UB and had cunningly erased their qualifications (clearly they had been round the block a few times) and as a result were successfully placed. However they will never be able to climb the corporate ladder because ostensibly they don't have degrees and if they own up they may be accused of cheating and lose their jobs. Talk about a Catch 22 situation!

Desperate times deserve desperate measures and high national unemployment is pretty desperate. Is this really the status quo, that many of our university graduates have to take jobs as cleaners and lie about their education in a market where there are simply too few jobs at graduate entry level? In my situation deep down I did know that I would eventually find employment. Not only was I well-educated but I was skilled as well and had a track record to show for it. But what if you are unproven and armed only with a university degree? And what will be the impact on your psyche when after three years of job-hunting all you have to show is a pile of rejection letters? If you're lucky, that is. As one disgruntled job seeker recently told me, "Mostly you don't even get that for your efforts."

While there is a lot of concern over the very high unemployment rate (conservatively estimated at 19%), especially among the youth, this is not translating into positive action at any level, nor serious consideration being given to the effect this will have on Botswana. The problem is not simply economic but has far-reaching social implications as well. Results from research conducted at the Labour Institute for Economic Research on the effects of unemployment on self-regard and satisfaction are worrying. Simply interpreted, being out of work leads to personal unhappiness, regardless of economic and other considerations. And without getting too heavy on the psychology, a nation with a band of educated, unhappy people is asking for problems in a whole bunch of easy to imagine ways.

It was interesting to hear John Holmes' opinion of the challenges that face Botswana with regard to labour on GABZ Fm's Daily Grind last week. I was completely taken aback by his claim that after decades of rapid GDP growth, about 40 per cent of the working age population is presently unemployed, a shocking statistic. And inflated, or not, the big question is, what does this mean to the future of our youth and our country and have we adequately planned for of our projected labour needs in Botswana? The reality, though stark and leaving a bitter taste in our mouths, is that even with the shining example of our healthy economy and political stability, we have throngs of highly educated (at government expense) graduates walking the streets in a constant state of despair, fearing that they have already failed at the game of life. But have they really failed, or has the system failed them? Are we forming the right policies?

Are we asking the right questions? What skills does Botswana need in the next 10-20 years, how will we re-integrate the current graduates being trained locally, regionally and internationally, is there enough development in areas of vocational and technical training, should we be exporting labour, what is the impact of the brain drain and loss of our brightest and best on Botswana?

I don't think corporate Botswana is taking this other pandemic seriously. We have thousands of educated people walking the streets, shoulders slumped and self-esteem at rock bottom because they are unusable. Government, do something! Corporate Botswana, create programmes for educated Botswana. Because if in the future we have a group of people who are unable to contribute and add value they will be angry citizens, who have lived lives of unhappiness and unfulfillment because they were not a part of working Botswana.

And we should learn from other societies and other times as to what end such mass discontent can lead. . If a man (or woman) is worthy of his/her wage then surely he or she is also worthy of a job to provide that wage? Clearly our Labour market isn't working and that's something we all need to work on

