ACCELERATING YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

Exploring Employer Perceptions Towards First Time Employees

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I. Abstract

Qualities such as discipline, commitment, positive attitude, resilience and the ability to deal with difficult situations are often cited as some of the main characteristics found to be lacking in South African school leavers, and one of the key reasons why employers are reluctant to hire from this population pool. There are increasing market supply side efforts to develop these qualities through work readiness programmes for the youth to improve their employability skills with varying success.

There is, however, comparatively little commentary or analysis of the market demand side and the attitudes of employers towards young people, particularly those who have undergone these programmes. Do employers change their perceptions and attitudes about hiring young people when presented with cohorts of youth who demonstrate the characteristics they value? Are there other factors that drive employer’s reluctance to hire from this population pool?

This paper will present the findings of a qualitative case study on how managers perceive first time employees. The study was conducted in a South African call centre business and focused on those managers working with young first time employees and how this is influencing organisational decisions about employing from this pool. The young first time employees all went through a work readiness programme designed by a South African youth employment accelerator organisation called Harambee.

The analysis suggests that there is still a reluctance from the business sector to employ further from this pool due to attitudes toward the youth as a collective and not, as always suggested, to their workplace behaviour.
KEY WORDS:
Youth, Unemployment, Work readiness, Behaviour, Manager, Perception

II. Introduction

It is not easy to be young in the global market today. The global youth unemployment rate, estimated at 12.6% in 2013, is close to its crisis peak (International Labour Organisation, 2013). In South Africa, two out of three young people aged between 18-28 are unemployed. Youth unemployment is possibly one of the biggest challenges that any country has to face because it has demographic, social, economic, health and environmental ramifications. There is a link between youth unemployment and civil unrest, political violence and crime. There are constant warnings that these staggering rates of youth unemployment represent a ticking time bomb. If a large and growing population of young people is left unemployed and in poverty for extended periods of time there are likely to be significant repercussions (The Guardian, 2013).

Despite the fact that the unemployment rate in South Africa has reached alarming levels, businesses continue to struggle to fill entry-level vacancies. Businesses, it would appear, prefer to poach employees from other companies rather than employ and train young people who lack skills and work experience. The findings of this study will, hopefully, provide solutions to curtail this trend.

According to the 2011 South African National Treasury discussion paper on confronting youth unemployment, some of the reasons suggested for the high rate of youth unemployment in South Africa include:

- Employers look for skills and experience; they regard unskilled, inexperienced jobseekers as a risky investment.
• Education is not a substitute for skills. Schooling is not a reliable signal of capabilities, and a poor quality education system feeds into poor workplace learning capacity.

• Given the uncertainty about the potential of school leavers, employers consider entry-level wages to be too high relative to the risk of hiring these inexperienced workers.

I work for a South African youth employment accelerator organisation called Harambee and the organisation has interacted with many employers to determine why they do not generally recruit from this pool. The general perception is that, not only do most of the unemployed youths have poor schooling and don’t have the necessary skills and experience, but behavioural factors such as discipline, commitment, positive attitude, resilience and the ability to deal with difficult situations are some of the reasons often cited by employers to explain their reluctance to employ from this pool. “Give me will and I can develop skill” is what one manager told my colleague. The lack of these “soft skills” is not limited to South African youths. Media reports in other countries suggest that employers believe that many youths are entering the job market without these skills.

The majority of unemployed youths in South Africa are disadvantaged by a number of factors including: an inadequate education system; lack of work experience and the fact that most of them come from a deprived socioeconomic background. There is a notion that their socio economic background often implies that these youths lack the social networks to understand the behavioural requirements of the world of work. Harambee works to find entry-level employment for this cohort of young people and to prepare them for the world of work by providing them with a form of work
experience and developing behaviours required to succeed in the world of work. In general, the feedback from employers who have engaged youths that have benefited from the programme we provide has been positive. A manager at one of the Harambee employers who managed Harambee recruits in an insurance business is recorded as saying that; “compared to other recruits, Harambees\(^1\) have been an extraordinary group. They have out-standard the standards of our company”.

Yet despite this generally positive feedback and the availability of entry-level jobs, employers are still reluctant to employ these youths. This is what has prompted me to ask what else needs to be done to increase the intake of these young people? Are there other factors that need to be investigated to accelerate employment of young people?

McQuaid, Green and Danson (2005) assert that whilst there has been extensive research into the supply side factors of unemployment; there is comparatively little commentary or analysis regarding the demand side. A search of the available research studies and reports revealed an abundance of literature on employers’ views of the skills required by young people entering the workplace, but less on employer strategies for easing young workers into first jobs (Oxenbridge and Evesson, 2012). Devins and Hogarth (2005) contribute to this area of research by considering the human resource practices of employers.

My exposure to psychoanalytical perspectives during my Executive Masters in Coaching and Consulting for Change at Insead has led me to understand that unconscious factors play a significant role in decision making and that examining the “out of awareness”\(^2\) levels of a situation can provide clues as to what may be really

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1 Harambees refer to young people who have been through the Harambee programme and are in employment.

2 “Out of awareness” is a phrase that refers to unconscious mind factors.

3 All names of participants in this study have been fictionalized to protect the privacy of the
going on. My study takes a closer look at one of the environments where Harambees have been employed using a qualitative case study lens to analyse the perceptions and attitudes of managers managing this cohort of young people in order to gain deeper insights that can provide suggestions as to what is required of employers to accelerate the employment of young people.

I believe that this is an important issue to assess because programmes such as Harambee can have a positive impact if implemented at scale, and therefore challenges need to be reviewed from as many angles as possible. It is my assertion that workplaces ought to have more proactive strategies related to how to incorporate and integrate first time employees into the world of work not only to ensure the sustainability of their employment, but also to provide them with opportunities to realise their creativity and productivity. The youth are the next generation of potentially productive economic and social actors and their productivity is vital to our development as a society. Part of Harambee’s vision is to enable young adults to realise their fullest potential.

**The Harambee Programme**

The Harambee model is a practical demonstration of a programme solution where the supply and demand factors highlighted in my literature review have been taken into account in the design and the processes for sourcing, assessing youth to ensure that the recruits are work ready through a “bridging” programme.

A majority of first time job seekers in South Africa are like Thabo\(^3\) who is from an impoverished background and barely managed to pass his matriculation examinations (South African school leaving certificate). He has no means of furthering his studies;

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\(^3\) All names of participants in this study have been fictionalized to protect the privacy of the participants.
neither does he have a curriculum vitae, nor has he ever had a job. Most potential employers consider youths such as Thabo a highly risky employment pool to draw from. They are, therefore, reluctant to employ them because of their lack of work experience and the challenging circumstances of their background, as well as the fact that they have very few social networks on which to model workplace behaviours due to their poor socio-economic background.

Harambee has a target to place 10 000 unemployed young South Africans like Thabo into sustainable employment opportunities by the end of 2014. To meet this target, Harambee sources young adults who have a matriculation certificate from communities where employment levels are low or non-existent. The organisation works to reduce the risk for employers by taking these young adults through a bridging programme which addresses the foundational and behavioural requirements for successful socialisation and integration into the world of work. Over the last two years, 4 500 young adults have been placed in work with 35 businesses.

Harambee utilises a range of methods for sourcing young people in a manner that overcomes transport and other barriers, including sending Harambee recruiters into specific communities to effectively reach job seekers. We also use processes and structures that eliminate barriers to employment; for example recruits are not required to have a Curriculum Vitae, nor are there any costs associated with applying.

The organisation conducts rigorous assessments on all prospective candidates. These are some of the qualities we look for in Harambees; to have an average to above-average learning potential\(^4\); to match the participating employers’ top performers’

\(^4\) Learning potential is part of the Harambee assessment process which contains both a psychometric evaluation and interview process. Harambee assessments processes have endeavoured to secure a testing process that is culturally free and fair and normed for the South African population. The
behaviours/ habits\(^5\); and to have acceptable numerical and literacy levels\(^6\).

Harambee’s tag phrase is “work for work”. The design is meant to simulate a work environment and not a training programme. The young adults are taken through an eight-week programme to further develop their numeracy and literacy while providing them with basic technical skills such as computer training and rapid typing. A behaviour change programme is run concurrently to this and this aspect of the programme focuses on the following: discipline; energy; resilience; the ability to deal with difficult situations; a performance driven work ethic and a positive attitude.

The Harambee bridging model for behaviour change is based on measuring behaviours outlined on a scorecard similar to that used at the Knowledge Is Power Programme (KIPP) charter schools network attended by children from low-income households in New York City. The KIPP scorecard is based on the Character Strengths and Virtues identified by Seligman and Peterson (2004) and on research that examines traits that determine success (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly, 2007; Duckworth, 2011). The work done by the KIPP charter schools has received much acclaim over the recent past and the organization has become one of the most prominent education reform organizations in the United States.

The behaviours are observed and scored by Harambee bridging managers who report scores weekly and publically display them over the eight week period of the bridging assessment process is aligned with best ethical testing practices as required by the Health Professionals Council for South Africa.

\(^5\) Candidates also complete the Shadow Match assessment, a widely-used South African matching tool which is able to assess an individual’s habits (behaviours) that are likely to emerge in any given environment when they face different dilemmas and tasks. There are 15 behaviours/habits that are assessed as well as conceptual fitness, task efficiency and an attitude scale. Completed Shadow Match profiles are then matched to the critical behaviours profiled for top performers in a specific job and in a specific company or geography.

\(^6\) This is an assessment to ascertain the candidate’s current levels of functional knowledge. The levels required for numeracy and literacy are sector, industry and job specific.
programme. Individuals are part of team-based leagues that are in competition to achieve the highest points on the scorecard. Although competition is a big driver of individual and team performances, some of the behavioural change requires support in the form of knowledge that is shared in personal mastery classes. Good performance guarantees staying on the programme and the opportunity to be put forward for interviews with potential employers. An overall review by the Harambee knowledge team indicates that most managers that work with Harambees feel that they are presentable, motivated and willing to learn.

This paper discusses the literature I have reviewed on the issue of youth unemployment, and employability factors to understand both the supply and demand side factors that have been researched and their impact on youth unemployment. The review also looks at literature on unconscious processes to provide an understanding of these concepts in change processes.

The case study research methodology that I have opted to use in this analysis will be outlined to illustrate its appropriateness in understanding the perceptions and attitudes of line managers. The findings of the case study will inform the derived understandings around the employability, or lack thereof, of youth employees.

The case study that I have developed is set in a South African call centre business named Future Access (FA). In this study, names of businesses discussed herein have been changed to preserve their privacy. Details of the company are discussed in the Methodology and Data Collection section under context.

I will discuss my findings and analysis of manager perceptions and responses that influence decisions about recruitment of Harambees and then outline my understanding of what this means for demand employability factors driven by
employers. My conclusion will outline the findings of the study as well as offering suggestions for future research required in this area.

III. Research Aims and Objectives

The aim of this study is to offer possible explanations for the “below the surface” demand employability factors of young people that are driven by employers. Through a case study research methodology I will analyse the perceptions and attitudes of managers in a South African business that has employed cohorts of youth that have been through work readiness programmes designed by Harambee. The study will assess what managers say about these young people in order to understand the barriers that prevent young workers from easing into their first jobs so that youth employment can be accelerated.

The objective of the study is to add a clinical lens to this growing area of publication of demand side employability factors. Additionally this research seeks to explore some of the reasons behind the ever growing problem of youth unemployment by looking at managerial perceptions and attitudes towards first time employees and how these might be a contributing factor to this unemployment phenomenon. The final objective of this research is to offer possible solutions to the crisis of youth unemployment that is engulfing not just South Africa, but the global economy by illuminating areas that can be addressed to effectively redress the situation.

*Below the surface* is a term derived from the change iceberg model related to barriers to change that are not on a conscious level and are driven by beliefs and perceptions
IV. Literature Review

Research\textsuperscript{9} conducted by a social investment company with significant shareholding in a number of South African financial services and hospitality businesses revealed that in their financial services business, specifically in their call centre functions and in their restaurants, managers were sitting with vacancy rates as high as 20% in entry level roles. This was puzzling in an economy with high youth unemployment rates. Upon further probing, line managers revealed that they had two main areas of concern when it comes to employing school leavers:

- The first being: “the matric certificate (high school certificate) is an unpredictable measure of performance on the job because I am not sure what I am getting. It is easier to poach experienced people because they have a reliable record. I know that this is not a long term solution but it is the easier route”
- Secondly they felt that: “young people with no work experience require too much hard work and energy to get them socialised for the world of work in terms of the right behavioural orientation”

The response to these findings was to work with managers to develop and pilot a programme that could de-risk young people who may not have work experience, but are a new labour pool, and to take them through some form of bridging programme where they are given work experience. It is out of this body of work that Harambee was born as a youth employment accelerator organisation.

Commentators on the issue suggest that preparing the youth for the world of work should focus on employability skills. Hillage and Pollard’s (1998) widely cited

\textsuperscript{9} The research discussed in this section is not publically available.
definition of employability is the individual’s ability to gain initial employment, maintain employment, move between roles within the same organisation, obtain new employment if required and ideally secure suitable and sufficiently fulfilling work.

Over the recent past, a large number of authors have sought to develop typologies of employability from a wide range of disciplinary and ideological perspectives (e.g. Hillage and Pollard, 1998; de Grip, van Loo and Sanders, 2004; Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth, 2004). Employability is a concept that has been used to understand supply side (job seeker) and demand side (employer) factors that influence the ability for one to find and keep a job.

Perhaps the most comprehensive model on employability is provided by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) who looks at:

- Individual factors (employability skills and attributes, demographic characteristics, health and well being, job seeking, adaptability and mobility)
- Personal circumstances (household circumstances, work culture, access to resources) and
- External factors (demand factors, enabling support factors).

A review of Australian employer opinions conducted by Oxenburg and Evesson (2012) includes a study of employers surveyed by the Scottish Government Social Research (2011) that found that employers who discovered that their young recruits were poorly prepared for work often attributed this to a lack of life experience and maturity, or to a poor attitude or personality traits, rather than to a lack of specific skills. A survey of 780 Human Resources professionals conducted in 2012 for the
CIPD by YouGov found that 59 per cent of employers agreed or strongly agreed that the young people they had interviewed or recruited in the past 12 months had unrealistic expectations about work. On the surface, this suggests an attitude problem in the young people of today – that oft-cited lack of “work ethic”.

McQuaid, Green and Danson (2005) assert that whilst there has been extensive research into the supply side factors of unemployment there is comparatively little commentary or analysis of the demand side. Devins and Hogarth (2005) contribute to this area of research by considering the human resource practices of employers. They highlight the correlation between relatively high levels of unemployment and employers’ recruitment difficulties in filling vacancies. They point to the characteristics of employers and their recruitment practices that are an important factor in ‘locking out’ the unemployed from evolving employment opportunities (Adams, Greig, McQuaid, 2000).

Their research further suggests that many employers use communication channels which may not reach the unemployed. These include internal communications about job opportunities through ‘newsletters’ and information boards or word of mouth. These methods of communicating vacancies have a very high probability of excluding unemployed people, particularly those most at risk of exclusion because they have few, or no, links to the world of work through their existing social networks. They also noted that the majority of employers they researched make few, if any, changes to their standard induction processes for new recruits who have never been previously employed.

Devins and Hoggarth, (2005) point out that notable, but woefully few, exceptions were those employers who adjusted their induction processes in a number of ways.
including lengthening the process, providing workplace 'buddies' and providing additional coaching input to ensure the success of the recruitment process. They conclude by pointing out that if recruitment from among the unemployed is to play a part in filling skills shortages, attention needs to be paid, not only, to the recruitment processes of employers, but also their retention and internal employee development practices.

My research is motivated by a need to understand what can be done by employers in their work space to make their organizations more supportive of first time employees. Oxenburg and Evesson, (2012) assert that organisations must be more human and responsive to young employees, with working environments that are more aligned to young people’s values and which provide genuine support when it is needed. They point to a range of post employment strategies which employing organisations can use to provide support for novice workers that have been examined based on United Kingdom and Australian employer study reviews. These take the form of – among other strategies – targeted and robust induction processes, close managerial or supervisory support, buddying and mentoring schemes, and strategies for ‘socialising’ young workers to the workplace culture.

Smith (2003) found young people’s success in new jobs was not just shaped by their relative behavioural, technical or cognitive skill levels, but was also influenced by the support they received both on and off the job during the period of transition. Taylor (2004) found that the relationship between young workers and management is a critical factor in early career experiences.

I believe that the literature could be enhanced by an analysis of some of the management’s psychological barriers to change. It is the contention of this paper
that one of the primary impediments to the employment of high school leavers is the disinclination among managers to encounter and content with change. In order to derive a more nuanced understanding of the factors at play within the context of managers and first time employees it is vital that the near instinctual responses to the prospects of change by potential employers be taken into cognisance.

Resistance to change occurs because change involves going from the known to the unknown (Coghlan, 1993; Steinburg, 1992; Myers and Robbins, 1991; Nadler, 1981). It could be argued that the vast majority of organisational change is managed from a technical viewpoint without recognising or understanding how the human element influences the success or failure of the change (Arendt, Landis and Meister 1995; New and Singer, 1983).

In their work Obholzer and Roberts, (1994) assert that psychoanalytical theory provides the conceptual framework for understanding unconscious processes. Matlin (1995) goes on to described these simply as thoughts and desires that are below the level of conscious awareness. However all of these factors are to be understood with the context of de Board’s, (1978) assertion that anxiety is central in all psychoanalytic theory and is often the cause of resistance to change due to fears and worries. He goes on to add that as a result of these anxieties, individuals develop a number of internal defence mechanisms to protect themselves from the unpleasant feelings of anxiety (de Board, 1978).

Theories on the subject assert that all human beings have defences as part of their survival instinct. Some defences are conscious, that is, they are used in ways that are aware, deliberate and intentional (Trevithick, 2011). This account of defences can be found in everyday language and described by Colman as:
More generally, it is a pattern of feeling, thought, or behaviour arising in response to a perception of psychic danger, enabling a person to avoid conscious awareness or conflicts or anxiety-arousing ideas or wishes (Colman, 2009, p 94).

Other defences are unconscious, that is, they lie beyond our immediate awareness and control and have two key features. On the one hand, their purpose is to guard us from further harm – protect us from thoughts, feelings, actions or events that are felt to be threatening, anxiety-provoking and painful – or that signal danger in some way (Jacobs, 2010). On the other hand, defences harbour the ability to distort our perception of reality. For example, events may be forgotten or repressed in order to protect us from memories that would produce feelings of anxiety, guilt or shame if they became conscious (Reber, Allen, Reber; 2009). Or defences can distort what is remembered, which means it can be difficult to gain an accurate picture of experiences and events. This understanding helps to explain why people can have widely differing accounts of the same situation.

In the research conducted by Bovey and Hede (2001), on resistance to organizational change, the results indicate that five maladaptive defence mechanisms are positively correlated with behavioural intention to resist change, namely: projection (falsely attributing to another one’s own unacceptable feelings, impulses, or thoughts); acting out (acting rather than reflecting or feeling and includes transference which is the recreation in present relationships of experiences from earlier childhood relationships); isolation of affect (separating ideas from the feelings originally associated with them. Losing touch with the feelings associated with a given idea while remaining aware of the cognitive elements); dissociation (a breakdown in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, perception of self or the environment) and denial (refusing to acknowledge some painful aspects of external
reality or subjective experience that is apparent to others). Conversely, the adaptive defence mechanism of **anticipation** (anticipating consequences and emotional reactions in advance and considering realistic alternative responses or solutions) and **humour** (emphasizing amusing and ironic aspects) were found to be negatively correlated with resistance intention.

The theory and research further suggests that individuals are motivated to defend, bolster, and justify the social systems in which they function (Jost and Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, and Nosek, 2004). In their paper entitled, *The Hidden Traps in Decision Making* (Hammond, Keeney and Raiffa, 1998) examine the psychological elements rooted in social defences that drive decisions when managers in organisations are confronted with uncertainty and point to six traps that the mind can fall into when making decisions:

1. **The Anchoring Trap**: initial impressions, estimates or data anchor subsequent thoughts and judgments.
2. **The Status Quo Trap**: decision makers display a strong bias towards alternatives that perpetuate the status quo.
3. **The Confirming Evidence Trap**: a bias that leads us to seek out information that supports our existing instinct or point of view while avoiding information that contradicts it.
4. **The Framing Trap**: the way a problem is framed i.e. as gains vs. losses, can profoundly influence the choices one makes.
5. **The Sunk Cost Trap** – making choices that justify past choices because of an unwillingness, consciously or otherwise, to admit mistakes.
6. **The Estimating and Forecasting traps** – choices clouded by the ability to
assess probabilities driven by overconfidence, prudence and memories of past events that leave a strong impression in our minds.

V. Methodology and Data Collection

In order to understand manager perceptions and attitudes towards previously unemployed youths who have been through a work readiness behaviour programme and how these contribute to organisational decisions made regarding on-going recruitment from this pool, I have focused my research on managers at Future Access (FA). FA is a South African financial services call centre business that has recruited an estimated 250 young first workers over the last year, all of whom have been through the Harambee programme.

Why a case study research method

I have used a qualitative case study research method as I deemed it the most appropriate methodological mechanism for understanding these perceptions and organisational recruitment decisions. I decided to use this method because it would enable me to accomplish the aim of the study, which is to gain deeper insights into the perceptions and attitudes of managers towards young first time employees and how these affect future recruitment decisions. As Yin (2009) shows, it is an approach that can help to understand patterns and the complexities of the causes and effects of an event. It is a method that can answer the how and why questions because of its ability to deal with a variety of strands of evidence.

This is important for my study in trying to understand why FA is considering not recruiting from the Harambee pool in the future, despite the generally positive
reviews about previous recruits. Understanding why, can help us to start thinking about the role of the employer in this context.

Guarding against prejudices associated with the case study methodology

Baxter and Jack (2008) discuss Stake’s (1995) and Yin’s (2003, 2006) two key approaches that guide case study methodology. Both of these approaches seek to ensure that the topic of interest is well explored, and that the essence of the phenomenon is revealed. However, a common criticism associated with the case study methodology is that there is a tendency for researchers to attempt to answer a question that is too broad or a topic that has too many objectives for one study. In order to avoid this problem, Yin and Stake have suggested that placing boundaries on a case can prevent this from occurring (Yin, 2003 and Stake, 1995 as cited by Baxter and Jack, 2008).

My study is restricted to managers that have managed Harambees and their perceptions about them.

Another critical criticisms directed to this approach relates to the difficulty in generalising the findings to a larger population group (Yin, 1994; Thomas, 2003 as cited by Baxter and Jack; 2008). Yin asserts that no set of cases, no matter how large, are likely to deal satisfactorily with this complaint about case study research methodology and that analysts should not try to generalise to other cases, but that they should rather try to generalise their findings to theory in the same way that a scientist generalises from experimental results to theory. In my study, I will connect my findings from the case study to the theory related to organisational psychology.
What type of case study is this?

I have used Yin’s categorisation to determine the type of case study I have developed. My study seeks to answer a question that aims to explain the presumed casual links in managers’ perception of first timers in the workplace with organisational recruitment decisions. This qualifies as an explanatory case study which, in evaluation language, is the explanations that would link program implementation with program effects (Yin, 2003).

In order to better illuminate the case, I have looked at data from different teams at FA (subunits from a single case) to provide a richer analysis and to avoid the pitfall that novice researchers fall into of analysing at the individual subunit level and failing to return to the global issue that they initially set out to address (Yin, 2003).

My data sources

Data was collected from:

1. Unstructured interviews with the following role players at FA:
   - Head of Recruitment
   - Business Unit Managers
   - Head of Organisation Development
   - Head of Quality Assurance

I felt that it was important to conduct the interview in a more conversational style to enable the interviewees’ to freely discuss their thoughts which would enable me to access their subconscious minds. I asked their views on the performance of the Harambees and their thoughts on the Harambees’ behaviour and performance and impact on FA culture.
2. Focus group session with the Human Resources and Training team

The focus group discussion was focussed on their experiences with the Harambees, assumptions of how they are perceived and their impact on the organisation.

3. Review of performance data
4. Informal discussion with Harambees at FA
5. General observations

Context

FA is a South African financial services company offering loans, insurance products and call centre capabilities offshore. FA’s shareholders initiated the Harambee programme and they employ an estimated 1000 call centre agents. The business is organised into several business units focussed on different financial services products. Each business unit is led by a business unit manager who has several teams. The unit manager has several teams that are led by team leaders. FA is a growing business which has expanded considerably over the last year. Business unit managers and team leaders have had to adjust to managing bigger teams and this has required improved management skills.

Historically, FA has largely employed Coloured\textsuperscript{10} people and typical Harambee candidates are Black from impoverished backgrounds. Management sees Harambee as a source of untapped talent that can help to racially diversify the organisation.

\textsuperscript{10} During the apartheid era in South Africa, in order to keep divisions and maintain a race-focused society, the government used the term Coloured to describe people of mixed race which was one of the four main racial groups identified by law: Blacks, Whites, Coloureds and Indians.
Harambees are the only group to have been recruited into the business without prior work experience. Over the last year FA has recruited 250 Harambees making them about a quarter of the current staff complement.

**Data Collection**

I set out to understand managers’ perceptions of Harambees and the impact on recruitment decisions by first meeting with Pam, the head of recruitment.

**Summary of Interview with the Head of Recruitment**

My impression of Pam was that she is a great supporter of the Harambee and is motivated by the idea of Harambee’s higher purpose and being part of something bigger. She believes that the introduction of Harambees at FA has overall been a success based on the fact that there have only been 30 Harambee to leave FA the majority of which being resignations to join other call centre businesses who are offering better salaries. Her view is that Harambees’s have shifted the culture of FA.

She believes that the notion of being part of something bigger gets lost in the business operations. She mentioned that recently there has been some “grumblings” in the organisation about Harambees and pressure to recruit fewer.

Her summary of complaints raised by the business:

- Punctuality
  - *Harambees experience transport issues because they live a lot further away from work. “Transport is a company wide issue but because there are so many Harambees, it is seen as a Harambee problem”*
Shifts are also a problem because public transport is not readily available at all times. Night shift is more complicated because it is a difficult time to travel and transport cost also a problem.

• Wellness
  
  o Psychological issues have been detected based on the number of Harambees using counsellors. Most do come from tough environments and have had a lot of trauma in their lives.
  
  o Fatigue is an issue because some of them have to be up at 4am to make it for morning shift because they stay far.
  
  o Some don’t eat or share food and this makes them tired.
  
  o There is high absenteeism and sick leave being reported.

• Quality of Harambees
  
  o Some recruiters and managers are saying that the calibre of Harambees has improved and they seem to display higher learning potential and performance levels have improved. Their behaviours however seem to be an issue. This used to be the reverse when we started out with Harambee.
  
  o Managers use the phrase of “super agent” and believe that they are not getting the right quality.
  
  o There are complaints about accent of Harambees and how they sound.

• Performance of Harambees
  
  o Issues related to performance are being raised but this is mostly in areas where data is not transparent.
  
  o Harambees are under the impression that they are doing well
Pam’s overall impression is that Harambees become the target when things are not going well and that the business has been going through changes and growth and this has caused some stress in the organisation. Her view is that perception is driving some of the negative feedback. She believes that a sense of being part of something bigger is missing.

**Interview with Head of Quality Assurance and Organisation Design**

Discussion with Zico, head of Quality Assurance and Luna, head of Organisation Design started off with a review of the first cohort of Harambees at FA:

- *The programme was something new and something to get right.*
- *The introduction of the Harambee programme had a successful outcome. The first cohort did well and on average, they outperformed existing agents. “they were the best we had”.*
- *Success must be attributed to other things in the environment because a lot of in-support was provided and a team leader was dedicated to the group. It probably helped that she was African Black and was one of the best team leaders. She was able to build cultural rapport with them quickly and they generally had more focus.*
- *Zico’s impression was that subtle things make a big difference and that the little choices make a big impact to implementation.*

Some of the current projects

- *In his new role as Quality Manager, he has to ensure a quality standard when interacting with customers is upheld and he acknowledges that currently there is no FA standard that is set and this impacts on training. This is creating a*
lot of know “noise” between the Training, Quality Assurance and the Compliance teams. This is in design.

• Luna explained that the term of “super agent” has been coined but there isn’t a current profile of this. There is a lot of speculation about what it could be and some of it is unrealistic. This is in design and when finalised it will inform the development of career paths.

Current issues from the floor are related to:

- Harambees ability to speak English in an articulate manner. There is a concern about the levels of assessments done for language and these should be more thorough.
- Learning Potential levels of Harambees is perceived to have dropped over time.
- Performance issues
  - Data and statistics indicate that Harambees are performing well but there is unhappiness on the floor.
  - The numbers and the sentiment does not match.
- Behaviours
  - Recently Team Leaders have been complaining about behaviour issues.
- Time Keeping:
  - This seems to be an issue in a specific unit.
  - Luna and Zico were not sure if this is a Harambee specific issue but that because there were many Harambees in that unit, it has been made a Harambee issue. Luna said that it could an issue of that them thinking they can get away with it.
Their reflections on the issues

- There has been an influx of black African people in the environment and the racial profile of FA is changing quickly and this is likely having a cultural impact. He is not sure how people are feeling about this, and whether there is enough work being done with regards to integration.

- Harambees are ambitious and hungry and they have possibly shaken the victim mentality that existed with FA staff. Competition from Harambees may be causing some of the “noise” in the environment.

- Zico finds it strange that behaviours are an issue now because this is what worked initially – everyone spoke highly about the behaviours of the Harambees. His thoughts were that maybe the environment was affecting the Harambees and that they are taking on FA behaviours. Other plausible reasons could be that the old Harambees have told the new ones that they can relax because they can get away with it?

- Most of the issues occurred when big groups of Harambees were introduced at the same time.

- His big question mark is around how well FA is managing diversity and ensuring that an “us” and “them” culture does not prevail.

- He is conscious that Harambees may be the victim of an environment that is threatened and that these other change management issues must be addressed. “It could be that there is subtle fears that need to be managed.”
Going Forward

- Luna’s view was that there would be more recruitment requirements in the coming year and that she would like to continue to partner with Harambee but credibility has been lost and she is finding it hard to convince Team leaders that this should be a source of inflow. She felt it was important for FA to address the issues raised.

A focus group session with the recruitment and training team

In the focus group session with the recruitment and training teams, the general view was that

- Harambees show that they want to work. They are enthusiastic and keen. They are eager to learn and are fast learners. They want to grow and are motivated. In some of the cases, they are applying for higher positions and show signs of wanting to grow.

- Trust with team leaders seems to be an issue because they don’t always seem comfortable talking to their team leaders and would rather wait to talk to recruiters and trainers. Trust issues may also be the result of working in an environment that is not very supportive.

- There is potentially an issue of Team Leaders feeling a little threatened by Harambees because they are ambitious and maybe they are seen as competition.

- Harambees need to adapt to operating in the harsh real world and this needs to be incorporated to the bridge.
• Harambees have very high expectations of themselves and when they don’t do well they become very hard on themselves.

• Sick leave is becoming a scape goat and is starting to be abused. Late coming and absence is becoming an issue.

• More numbers of the Harambees are becoming overwhelming for the HR team to continue providing support to Harambees.

There was an overall sense from this group discussion that reasons for Harambee recruitment are not clear to the business and that investing in good communication could be helpful.

After the session I spoke to one of the trainers who mentioned the race dynamic and believed that it was possibly contributing to the “noise” coming from the floor about Harambees.

**Interviews with the business unit leaders**

Interviews with four business unit leaders revealed conflicting perceptions about Harambees.

Two business unit leaders (Anne and Chantal) had positive feedback about Harambees and revealed that at the beginning of the process, they were nervous and anxious about taking in the Harambees because they were not sure about the calibre of people and they put a lot of effort in ensuring that it was a successful process by providing extensive support. Harambees turned out to be fantastic! The overall perception based on performance in their units, is that:

> Anne manages 28 Harambees out of team of 70. Chantal manages 20 Harambees. Team leaders manage below the Business Unit leaders
• Both Anne and Chantal were impressed with the Harambees’ positive attitude. “They are open to new ideas and don’t resist change – they are the first to raise their hands to help in the implementation of new programmes”.

• They are motivated and are go-getters. They work hard. They apply for higher positions and want to do well.

• They are energetic and genuinely “show up” at work instead of just being there. Their presence is felt in the organisation.

• Performance as a collective is average to above average. There have been a few on the list of top performers.

• Chantal pointed out that they struggle in sales functions and seem to do better in a customer care environment. Compared to their peers, their performance is average.

• Where there are issues, these are common across all agents and not really Harambee specific.

• There have been reported cases of late coming but this is not the majority and it is because of long distances they travel from home. Unfortunately this is affecting perceptions about them.

• Impact of Harambees on the FA culture is very positive. Others who have been at FA view them as competition but this is positive because it motivates them.

Feedback from the other two business units leaders (Mazi and Connie) was mixed. Based on their experience of Harambees in their units, their perception of Harambees was that:

Mazi’s managed 21/51 Harambees and has since left the unit. Her perception:
• During interviews with Harambees, it was clear that they were well prepared. Most handled curve balls in the interviews well and it was pleasing to see. The experience on the floor has been different.

• Health and Wellness has proved to be an issue that has affected late coming and absence.
  
  o A Harambee died in Mazi’s business unit and her headline issue is health and wellness – 90% of the 21 Harambees recruited have had absence issues that are related to poor health. In some cases, they don’t eat at home and there’s a pattern of complaints about chest pains.

• Lack of good support structures at home affects time keeping and absence e.g inability to have childcare arrangements.

• Most don’t have a work reference point in terms of understanding what is expected of employees. Mazi demonstrated this through an example where some agents who were on last warning for timekeeping and facing dismissal would rather turn around if they are five minutes late to go see a doctor for a sick leave note than show up late. Her view was that it impacts on productivity and indicates they don’t fully understand the employer and employee relationship. More information will empower Harambees to know how to deal with these types of situations and in understanding what it expected of them.

• This has been an issue with about half of the Harambees in this unit and has led to “one minute resignations” where notice is given with immediate effect. Reasons for resignations were attributed to relocations or opportunity for better offers.
• There seems to be pressure from home about providing money and this adds to their work pressure.

• There are differences in the salaries of the Harambees because they go into different units and have differing starting salaries. This needs to be explained on the bridge. They need to know that there is a career path and success is dependant on hard work.

• Their financial planning is weak and they need budgeting skills.

• Mazi said “I used to be passionate about Harambee and I still am. Their issues have been a result of circumstances and if they had the information they would be better prepared”.

Connie manages 33/88 Harambees

• The first group of six did exceptionally well and we started to recruit from Harambees in big numbers.

• The Harambees have great energy and it is heart warming when you see people who are grateful for small things. They show willingness to improve their social circumstances.

• In comparison to the first group, there is drop in quality with reference to learning potential. The business is transforming and learning potential assessment may need to transform as well.

• Behaviours have been poor - two Harambees were caught drunk on the job and there was a similar incident shortly after this.

• There are also personal issues that have had to be referred to company psychologist that are contributing to late coming and absence. In a recent
case, an agent has been late and absent because of cultural rituals he had to perform.

- Connie’s assessment was that because there are more numbers of Harambees, the number of issues have gone up. She stated that percentage of disciplinary cases have increased.
- She also noted that her unit is a feeder to the business. Most units predominantly take Harambees from this unit and so top performers get taken by other units.

**Review of performance data**

The performance scorecard is based on

- quality,
- discipline and
- performance (varies from unit to unit).

Performance data collected from three of the four unit leaders all showed the performance of the Harambees to be overall average to above average. However, the information provided did not contain a great deal of detail.

**Short informal discussions with Harambees at FA**

I had informal chats with Harambees from various teams, some one on one, some in pairs and others in large groups. My overall impressions were that:

- They seemed to be enjoying the fact that they are working.
- Many were proud of their achievements and bragged about how well they were doing, in some cases, doing better than the “externals” (FA staff).
• They identified strongly with their identity as Harambees.
• Many spoke about their ambitions to be the best in their teams.

Few spoke about the difficulties they faced in the environment but maybe given time and a space to reflect, they would have shared more.

VI. Analysis

Using myself as tool – My reflections

In order to make sense of the data I collected, I first followed Loewenberg’s (DATE AND PAGE NUMBER) recommendation to “sense and formulate latent unconscious meaning”. I read the summary of the interviews to assess my response to each of them and to determine what struck me and made an impression on me.

Interview with Pam:

• I responded to Pam warmly. She showed a genuine belief in the Harambee programme and the employment of these young people.
• She seemed uncomfortable to discuss the “grumblings” coming from the floor about the Harambees and often defended them. I was not sure if she was being polite because I work for Harambee or whether it was because she genuinely was still figuring out in her mind what the issue could be. During the interview, she mentioned a few times that Zico was someone who needed to be managed and described him as difficult and an influential stakeholder.
• Her assessment was that a sense of a “higher purpose” was missing in the organisation about the Harambee programme. It seemed that she was
someone who connected with issues on an emotional level. I wondered how much of this higher purpose was shared by the rest of the organisation. I was curious about whether she saw this as a programme to help young disadvantaged black youth or whether she believed that they added value to the business.

- My sense was that she wanted to continue using the Harambees but needed help to reclaim the positivity and excitement that used to surround the Harambee programme.
- She seemed worried that if she was not able to convince key Business Unit leaders and heads of key support functions, the Harambee programme would be at risk.
- It appeared that she carried a lot of responsibility about the continuation of the programme.

Interview with Zico and Luna:

- The interview with Zico and Luna was constructive and robust. I expected that Zico to be negative about the Harambees but instead I found him to be willing to explore different reasons for the negative perceptions coming from the floor. They both acknowledged that there was a negative perception of the Harambees on the floor but that the performance data did not correlate with the negativity. As if there is an assumption that performance drives perceptions.
- Zico seemed to nostalgic for the early days of the Harambee and was proud of what was achieved. I thought his analysis of the big impact made by small decisions was accurate. According to him, the small things were
about the amount of support that was provided to the first group of Harambees and the rapport that they were able to build with their team leader. He believes that the fact that the team leader was African black contributed to success. I do not believe that this was the only reason for the success in building rapport because Mazi is an African black and does not seem to have built similar rapport with the Harambees in her team. This suggest to me that rapport building is about a lot more than having the same racial identity and that it is a “skill” that can possibly transcend race and other identities. I would suggest that developing line manager’s emotional intelligence - a set of emotional and social skills that enable us to make our way in a complex world for effective daily functioning – (Stein and Book, 2011) could be part of the answer to enabling managers to provide better support to young people.

- Zico made reference to race and competition as a potential source of threat to the environment and this resonated with me. What I thought of as “out of awareness” dynamics he described as the “subtle” dynamics. He sounded to me like someone who was trying to understand the problem in a more holistic way.

- Luna was open to other reasons that could be driving perception but seemed attached to the idea that there was a difference in the learning potential of the recent cohorts. She acknowledged that the performance data did not indicate a problem with performance of the Harambees.

- When exploring the extent to how perceptions were being shaped by the “behaviour” of the Harambees, Zico suggested that the Harambees could be adopting behaviours that are in the FA environment. He suggestion that
the Harambees could be realising that they can get away with “bad” behaviour” made me think that these “unlike” Harambee behaviours could be something they have picked up from the FA floor.

• When the discussion turned to the impact that the Harambees had made to the FA culture, Luna did not want to comment on the Harambees as a collective and preferred to see them as individuals. I feel there is an element of denial about the change taking place in the organisation and that she had some degree of detachment.

• I noted how they challenged the perceptions made about the Harambees by being open to the possibility other reasons beyond the control of the Harambees. Reasons that could “subtly” be in the environment. Zico also showed a lot of empathy for the FA staff.

• The term of “super agent” that Luna described, conjured up images of a super hero that does not exist in real life. I wondered whether the organisation would be able to get to a definition. Although she mentioned that this definition was still being developed, it was clear that it was a term that some people in the organisation have started using based on what Pam shared.

Focus group discussion with the Recruitment and Training team:

• My judgement was that the Recruitment and Training team makes strong connections with the Harambees before they officially start as agents.

• They seem to assume a similar level of responsibility that Pam showed about the Harambee programme.
• My reflection of the discussion is that at some level, they felt they were being blamed for the perceived “poor quality” that the organisation was complaining about. A few made the comment that line management is also involved in recruitment and interviews and that there seemed to be no acknowledgement from line management that they also made the choice.

• They raised issues of trust between team leaders and the Harambees that could possibly be driven by the fact that team leaders are not as supportive as they should be because of the “competition” the Harambees represent. There was an overall sense that the competition in the environment was a good factor.

• Their view on absence and time keeping issues was that the Harambees were using these as “excuses”. I understood this to mean that it was a symptom of a larger problem that probably had to do with relationship with line managers.

• They suggested that the Harambee programme should be well communicated to the organisation as a way of increasing support. This made sense to me as a logical first step in change management and made me wonder how the introduction of the Harambees had been managed. I was not able to confirm this. I wondered about possible change management strategies that could be developed and the possibility of associating the Harambee programme with something that was seen to be working in the organisation.
Anne and Chantal seemed to have build good rapport with the Harambees and seemed satisfied with how the Harambees were performing and their behaviours.

Although Anne noted late coming she did also point out that in the majority of cases it was attributed to external causes, such as distance to work.

Chantal spoke about difficulties they experienced in closing deals but that this was common to others starting in the unit.

Anne felt that it was unfortunate that these cases that are in the minority are driving perception about Harambees.

Anne rated the Harambees to be average to above average in terms of performance, whereas Chantal felt they were average. Both rated Harambees highly in terms of their behaviours and impact on the culture of the organisation.

What they said contradicted the negative perceptions that were said to prevail on the floor and I wondered how many others had these positive perceptions.

Mazi and Connie seemed to locate the problem with the Harambees.

My understanding of their views was that they thought the Harambees experienced problems at work because of their impoverishment, lack of role models and a support structure.
• They seemed unable to quantify the scale of the problem but were clear that it was a big issue that required attention.

• They repeatedly mentioned that they are passionate about the Harambee programme and that they did not necessarily don’t want to stop recruiting from Harambee. I wondered how much of this was the “right” thing to say.

• My sense was that they allowed a few incidents by a small group of Harambees to inform their view of the rest of the group. They also made assumptions about the lifestyle of a young person from a disadvantaged background and how this impacts work.

• I had to contain myself during this interview and had to practice some negative capability\(^\text{11}\) in order to allow them the space to express themselves because I felt that they had developed stereotypes about age, race, culture and class that they were using to judge the Harambees.

• I imagined that the impact of the death of a Harambee at work caused some level of trauma and made Mazi more careful about Harambees.

• The idea of “one minute” resignations sounded to me like the response of someone who no longer wished to remain in a situation rather than someone who had found a better opportunity.

• I was also curious about the other reasons that caused Mazi to leave the unit.

\textit{Performance data:}

The recorded data for the Harambees’ performance showed itself to be average to above average but records on attendance and punctuality were not readily

\(^{11}\) Negative capability is the capacity to sit with feelings and reactions and not to respond immediately (Executive Masters in Consulting and Coaching for Change, Wave 13 class notes, Module 2).
available. The contrast in the data and in perceptions was interesting to me and signalled irrational driving forces.

**Interactions with Harambees:**

I was most struck by their ambition and what appeared to be a drive to succeed. They were proud of themselves and openly shared their achievements and future hopes for promotions.

They used the term “externals” when talking about other FA staff that were not Harambees. This caught my attention and I wondered about what they saw the others as being external to? This signalled to me a sense of “us” and “them” that is prevalent in company.

**Common themes:**

In thematic analysis, emphasis is on the content of a text, what is said more than how it is said, the told rather than the telling (Riessman, 1993). In determining themes, I did not only look at the text in the perceptions but also looked at the sense that seemed to inform what was said and that it was consistent across the subjects of the case. I noted my initial thoughts about these common themes.

1. There was a strong tendency to speak about then and now in how the interviewees spoke about their perceptions.
   - In all the interviews, everyone made reference to the experience when the programme started and compared that to now.
   - The process of identifying Harambees for FA has not changed. The key difference seems to be in the support that is given to the Harambees. The
environment seems to have also changed and may be in a more threatened state than at the start of the programme.

2. The interviewees seen to have an altruistic connection to the Harambee programme.
   - There was an expression of the meaning of the programme that resonated with the interviewees at an emotional level.
   - The idea of doing something good seemed to be a strong motivator for the managers and the HR team.

3. The concept of the Harambees being “different” to what the environment is used to was expressed consistently although in different forms i.e. race, culture, socio economic profile, age, lifestyle and behaviours. This concept extended to speaking about the Harambees as a homogeneous collective.

4. The notion of Harambees as a collective.
   - All interviewees spoke about Harambees as though they were one entity.
   - During a side conversation with Pam, I noticed that she was referring to individuals that had been at FA for over a year as Harambees and I asked her when do they stop being Harambees and her response was that they will always be Harambees. She added that their employee numbers identified them as Harambees.
   - The groups of Harambees I spoke to seem to identify themselves as Harambees and not FA employees.

5. Time keeping is an issue that was raised in every interview.
   - It was not clear how time keeping among Harambees compared to others workers. It was interesting to note that the timekeeping issue was attributed to different reasons:
o **Transport of the Harambees and their locations.**

o **An isolated trend in a specific business unit - response to something in the environment.**

o **Generalisation about the socio-economic environment Harambees come from.**

o **Poor support structures at home.**

In some cases I noticed that time keeping was linked to absence from work and extended to resignations in the two business areas that did not have positive experiences with Harambees.

Although the following were not mentioned by everyone interviewed, I felt that they were ideas worth noting and important considerations because of the impact of the ideas on change:

1. The recruitment and training team mentioned a lack of trust between the Harambees and team leaders.
   
   • Management and organisational literature points to trust being of importance to organizations because it is the basis for cooperation, which makes it possible for employees to do their work. There is evidence that little or no trust creates a hostile, toxic work environment where productivity is limited and people cannot live up to good values.

2. The notion of perceived competition and the threat it may pose to the existing environment.
   
   • Although the competition that was said to exist was described as healthy, the possible threat felt in the environment, possibly as a result of the perceived competition, should not underestimated.
3. Influx of a new race group into the environment.
   - Although this was only verbalised by Zico, I felt that it spoke to the notion of diversity which is greatly influences trust in organisations. A diverse workforce is less able to rely on interpersonal similarity and common backgrounds and experiences to contribute to mutual attraction and enhance a willingness to work together (Berscheid and Walster, 1978; Newcomb, 1956).

4. Need for organisational communication about the Harambee programme.
   - One of the key reasons attributed to change efforts failure in organisations is a lack of communication. The key purpose of communication during organisational change can be to reduce resistance to change.

Summary of my findings

Finding 1: There was a lot of focus on the Harambee programme and efforts to ensure its success. These efforts seems to have been focussed on the support provided to the first cohort. It appeared from the reflections of the managers interviewed that the support has been reduced.

Finding 2: There seems to be some emotional capital that the Harambee programme has in the organisation. All the interviewees seem to believe that the programme had a bigger meaning that they were connected to. This is capital that can harnessed to translate to better results in this programme as was outlined in Dr Quy Nguyen Huy’s lecture on emotional capital and strategy execution during the EMCC programme.

Finding 2: The identity of Harambees is fixed and does not seem to have evolved to define them fully as FA employees and in some way they are still a distinct group in
the environment.

**Finding 3:** Perception about Harambees are mixed. I was not able to determine if there were more negative perceptions than not, but it was clear that there was a focus on the bad news than good news. This is possibly because as humans we are hard wired for survival. The negative perceptions seem to form the dominant narrative and influences how the entire group of Harambees is judged.

**Finding 4:** The suggestions for the reasons attributed to why incidents may be occurring were linked to the environment.

- Their lack of knowledge about the workplace
- Assimilation and adoption of behaviours reflective of the FA environment
- Excuses that reflect the tension that possibly exists between team leaders and agents.

The tension between team leaders and agents is linked to lack of trust, competition and threat.

**Finding 5:** The ownership of the success of the programme resides with HR and not with the business leaders. Although this finding is based on my sense and not on verified data, I believe it has a big impact on the success and continuation of the programme.

**VII. Discussion**

The aim of this study is to offer possible explanations for the “below the surface” demand employability factors of young people that are driven by employers through an analysis of manager’s perceptions. The study assesses what managers
say about these young people in order to understand barriers to change.

The findings and overall feedback suggest that:

- Supply side interventions through work readiness programmes to develop young people’s workplace behaviours can have a level of success.
- Support provided within the workplace to the first cohorts was a factor in ensuring their success.
- Resistance from the organisation to increasing the intake of these young people is possibly based on the perceptions that have been established by the behaviour of some of the recruits and generalised to the rest.
- Reasons for the deterioration in the perception of the recruits may be due to a response to the workplace environment.
- Whilst there is a desire from management for Harambee to succeed, this is not enough to change perceptions.

The general feedback about the Harambees is encouraging to those concerned with supply side employability factors. Reviews of their positive attitude, enthusiasm and will to work confirms that efforts to ready young people for work are worthwhile and can result in success.

In the summary of the research done by Oxenbridge and Evesson (2012) to ease young people into work, support from managers is highlighted as necessary for success. The findings in my study concurs with this recommendation and suggest that this support was a key factor in the first cohort of Harambees being successful. The support provided was in the form of a dedicated team leader who could build a rapport with the young people. The recruitment and training team
also described themselves as a support system for the Harambees and explained that they made themselves available to discuss progress and challenges that the recruits might be experiencing. With the numbers of Harambees increasing, this does not seem to be a viable model for providing support and line managers need to take more responsibility.

It is really vital that managers and supervisors understand that young people’s success at work is not just shaped by their relative behavioural, technical or cognitive skill levels, but that it is also influenced by the support they receive on the job (Smith 2003). While the self-efficacy of the young person clearly eases their transition into work, it is apparent that the experience and skill of the employer in dealing with young workers also makes a significant difference to the success of the move into fulltime work (Tresize-Brown 2004).

I hold the view that support manifests itself in day-to-day interactions and whilst it can be built into company processes and systems in the form of in-depth structured induction programmes, buddying and mentoring processes, managers, ultimately determine the overall experience. It is these day-to-day interactions that are important in transitioning young people into work and they are often shaped and influenced by what else is going on in the environment.

Threat and competition were mentioned in the interviews and I think their influence cannot be underestimated in how they shape team leaders’ daily interactions with the Harambees. Threat is a natural source of anxiety and feeds resistance. Bovey and Hede (2001) observed that the literature on resistance to organisational change is focussed on organisational issues rather than the psychological factors and advice that when individuals demonstrate symptoms of
resistance it is important to distinguish between the symptoms of resistance and the causes behind it. The issue of an influx of a different race group and “class” of person has to be taken into account because of South Africa’s past history.

Based on the research by Cilliers (2007) on diversity dynamics seen in South African organisations, identity splits cause anxiety which in turn create projections. Two findings made by Cilliers’s research that are relevant to this study are that:

- South Africans are obsessed with their split identity and the past has negatively influenced present connections. South Africans carry and nurture experiences (baggage) from history which hinder connection.
- The anxiety around primary (race, gender, age, sexual orientation) and secondary diversity dimensions (education, relationship/marital/parental status) are causing projection and projective identification, transference and counter transference.

FA has identity splits by age, race and class. Being a Harambee also seems to be a further split in this picture. It is hard to foster a collaborative environment when people don’t identify themselves as a unit. Rather than work collaboratively, different groups tend to compete with one another. This competition, more often than not, simmers under the surface. The assumption is that effective human relations amongst diverse employees in the organisation are possible only when differences are accepted and valued (Wheeler, 1996). It is important to be aware of the anxieties that the introduction of groups of young people brings into organisations and to manage this appropriately.
Although I accept that the threat expressed could be the result of poorly managed diversity with the staff, I did, however, wonder whether or not there was a reasonable cause for concern for the FA staff members who had been there for a while. I asked myself if there were other motives in bringing in these young people. Was there an unspoken desire that FA wished to fulfil? Zico mentioned that a possible reason for the deterioration of behaviours could be that Harambees were adopting FA behaviours. I found it odd that the characteristics that the organisation seeks in young people and claims to value are not strongly present in the current space to reinforce and sustain behaviours learnt on the Harambee bridge. Could it be that the organisation itself is struggling with their experienced staff and hopes to change this by bringing in these cohorts of young people that possess these valued characteristics?

In their explanation of resistance to change, Kegan and Lahey (2001) refer to hidden competing commitments which are subconscious hidden goals that conflict with stated commitments. Although hidden commitments tend to be personal, groups are also susceptible to the dynamics of immunity to change. Organisations fall prey to inner contradictions that “protect” them from significant changes they may genuinely strive for.

Based on my findings, I attempted to use their recommended questions solution for diagnosing this resistance to change and uncovering the competing commitments of FA as an organisation:

- What would FA like to see in order to take on youth in their environment?
  - Cohorts of young people who demonstrate a will to work and stated behavioural characteristics.
• What beliefs or commitments are implied by this recommended change?
  o This implies that these behaviours are what FA is looking for in their employees and that their current employees might lack these behaviours or no longer demonstrate them.

• What is FA doing or not doing, that is keeping the commitments to change from being fully realised?
  o Based on feedback on possible reasons for the deterioration in behaviours, it does not seem that FA an environment that mirrors its desired behaviours.

• What if FA did the opposite of what it is currently doing, would that cause discomfort, worry or vague fear?
  o If FA had to insist of its own environment being demonstrative of these behaviours, it may cause discomfort among current staff members and anxiety about the security of their jobs.

• What if FA were to actually carry out this opposite behaviour, what outcomes are they trying to prevent?
  o It is possible that a few of their current staff would not survive in this new environment.

Based on this attempt to uncover the organisation’s hidden commitment, it is possible that, although there is commitment at a conscious level to make the Harambee programme work, there might also be a hidden commitment not to shake up the environment too much because it might force the organisation to deal directly with what is not working in the way current employees do things.

Other possible barriers to change that employers should reflect on when
embarking on youth employment programmes are the various decision making traps: The Status Quo Trap where decision makers display a strong bias towards alternatives that perpetuate the status quo; the Confirming Evidence Trap which is a bias that leads us to seek out information that supports our existing instincts or points of view while avoiding information that contradicts them (Hammond, Keeney and Raiffa, 1998). These authors advice that the best protection against psychological barriers is awareness and questioning, which can uncover errors in thinking before they become errors in judgement.

The ownership and communication of large scale change programmes to the rest of the organisation is also an issue that was highlighted in the study. My sense that the responsibility of the success of the programme was with HR is problematic to me and made me think about the importance of visible leadership driving these changes. Some of the key reasons identified by Kotter (2002) as to why change in organisations fail are: lack of a guiding coalition – a group with enough power in the organisation to lead change and a lack of constant and consistent communication about the change vision. Kotter advises that communication about change in the organisation should be driven through every vehicle possible and in order for new behaviours required to support the change to happen, they should be exemplified by the guiding coalition and made visible in the organisation. Organisational change management is a key success factor in increasing the intake of young people into first jobs.

VIII. Limitations

The sample of interviews conducted to develop the case study is possibly limited but I believe it is a fair representation of the factors at play. A formal discussion
with the Harambees to understand their view on claims made against them regarding late coming, abuse of sick leave and high absenteeism could have maybe shed more light on the negative perceptions that prevail about them. Lack of detailed performance data from the managers meant that I was not able to interrogate and analyse the data to see if there were obvious trends that could inform other things that needed to be tested.

I am also aware of my possible bias towards the recruitment of young people in organisations because of my role at Harambee and the emotional connection I have to the organisation. All these factors are limitations that should be discounted in this study.

IX. Conclusion

The lack of qualities such as discipline, commitment, positive attitude, resilience and the ability to deal with difficult situations in young people along with lack of experience are issues that has received much attention and cannot be undermined when looking at why there is a youth unemployment crisis. The efforts that are going into developing these qualities through work readiness programmes have varying reviews and Harambee seems to be a programme that is achieving some level of success based on the overall feedback from managers.

It is clear to me through the literature review that this is not the only issue that is affecting youth unemployment. Individual factors such as demographic characteristics, health and well being, job seeking, adaptability and mobility, personal circumstances as well as access to resources all have a role to play in the current situation. Additional to these are external contributing factors such as demand and an
enabling support structure, and all of these are issues that were raised up during my interviews for this study in some form or other.

The enabling support that employers can offer is an issue that requires more attention because it is determined by more than processes, systems and skills available in organisations, but also by supervisors’ and managers’ willingness to provide that support. There is a saying that people seldom do things to the best of their ability, they do things to the best of their willingness.

My study provides a glimpse into factors that can make those who are expected to provide this support to be unconsciously unwilling to do so. The possible threat that young people pose to older employees and to organisations as a whole is a suggestion made by this study that I think can be explored further and considered for future research. If we are to avoid the youth unemployment time bomb explosion that many warn against, careful change management that is not only focussed on the technical factors but that also recognises and understands the influence of the human element is required.
X. Bibliography


