

Coping with Underemployment

With the contraction of business within the corporate and public sectors, there has been a rising tide of unemployment. The current wave of unemployment has given rise to a fierce competition for jobs. There is a sound basis on which to draw the conclusion that as a direct consequence of these two factors, a growing level of underemployment which has emerged.

The issue of employability has now become issue number one for most persons who are desirous of and are seeking work. Those who were once employed and now displaced, are put in a position where they have to come up against those who have been on the hunt for a job for some length of time, and the new increasing number of graduates from schools, colleges and universities, who are in the struggle for the few available jobs. With the changing dynamics of the labour market, those who are in the best position to compete may well be those who have the requisite knowledge skills and competencies which are on demand. The presumption is that many may be out of the loop, as they their ability to deliver may have well be overtaken by the rapid changes in the technologies being used in today's workplace. This means that there is a constant need to be on the cutting edge, and therefore there is a premium to be placed on training and retraining.

The challenge which many persons in the workforce having to deal with, is being able to find the type of job that allows them to fully utilize their knowledge, skills, talent, expertise, training and experience. In short, these persons are being underutilized and hence they can consider themselves as being underemployed.

The issues of underemployment in today's world is real rather than perceived. This is borne out by the fact that underemployment has been attributed to adverse economic conditions, such as a recession, which occurs when there is a decline in economic activity. The research also teaches us that underemployment is also caused when the supply of workers is greater than the demand for workers. In today's prevailing circumstances where technological change and innovation are playing a major role in driving retrenchment and layoffs in the private and public sectors, a case is tailor made for the high level of underemployment which is emerging. With the desperation setting in, many are being forced to accept jobs that fall below their value attached to their knowledge, skills, expertise, experience and training.

Under employment can be a source of frustration to those who are impacted. There is likely to be the feeling of demotivation and frustration where persons are seemingly required to operate at what to some may be below par. This comes about where there is a reduction in income, benefits which could have the net effect the individual's social life and status. One can well imagine the case of a Public Officer, who because of the process of retrenchment, is reduced from a desk job to that of plying trade as a vendor or even being employed as an attendant in a service station. This is a fine example of how cruel the system can be to workers. It should also matter that the outcome is not in the best interest of national productivity, as the loss of valuable expertise and experience means that the systems has waste an investment of capital in the training and development of the human resource. This to some may not matter, as they will take comfort in

the fact that this comes with the territory, as the world moves ahead with the accelerated pace of development.

In the current labour market environment, where massive unemployment is the norm, underemployment may appear to be more acceptable to many as the better of two evils. Inasmuch that it is all about survival, there is not that one can do to beat the system. It requires that persons continually upgrade their knowledge, skills and competencies and be prepared to grasp the next opportunity which presents itself. That being said, it remains a struggle to ensure that the fall that is being experienced, does not place individuals before the poverty line. The fallout from underemployment can be severe. With persons unable to meet their social needs, there is the possibility that the weak could fall victims of crime, or become involved in other anti-social behaviour; ranging from trading in illegal drugs to prostitution.

While anti-social behaviours may be frowned upon, a moment ought to be spared not to be too fast to condemn, criticize and ridicule those who fall as victims of circumstance. More attention ought to be paid to those former workers who become traumatized by the experience of the loss of their jobs, which contributed to their financial insecurity and reduction of social standing. The end result of this can be emotional and physiological stress. It requires that more attention is paid to the emotional and physiological needs of employees, and hence the systems within our workplaces needed to be reviewed and revamped in an effort to address the growing problem which comes with underemployment as much as it does with being unemployed.

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