

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal

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Business must be proactive in the fight against HIV/Aids

The spread of HIV/Aids can be stemmed with the development of a co-operative partnership between government, business, labour and society in general, according to **Donna Stevenson**.

The latest statistics from the Bureau of Statistical Services reveal that 22,4% of the South African population is infected with the virus that causes Aids. The highest level of HIV infection is found in KwaZulu-Natal, where it is believed that an estimated 32,5% of the population is infected, while the Western Cape province experiences the lowest levels at 7,1%.

It is evident from these figures that HIV/Aids impacts on an increasing number of people. The impact is already being felt by certain industries, particularly those that are highly labour intensive, such as the security industry. Such sectors are experiencing first-hand the loss of skilled labour and increased absenteeism. Both of these elements are indications of the very real spread of the disease.

Such factors have already encouraged a number of industries to identify HIV/Aids as being of particular concern. Police, security and legal practitioners, for example, have identified the pandemic as the most serious threat to their industry. The security industry, for example, has estimated that replacing the labour that is likely to be lost as a result of Aids-related deaths, would require the recruiting and training of more than 21 000 people annually. This is more than four percent of the total number of people currently employed by the industry. Given that the existing recruiting pool will also be severely affected by the impact of HIV/Aids, the impact on companies is likely to be great.

Other businesses, too, are likely to lose about four percent of their employees to Aids annually over the next 10 years. Companies will in future battle to reach the staffing levels of trained personnel that are required for them to sustain their businesses. As a result the profitability of industry will be affected through the impact of HIV/Aids on employee benefits and productivity.

Sectors such as the security industry are further vulnerable because of other factors. Employees work under harsh working conditions, particularly where security guards are exposed to the elements for much of their working time. Employees are drawn from the 20 to 35 year old age group, which is the most vulnerable to Aids. Other large companies also draw on this market particularly with regard to first time employees.

While businesses are affected, the general impact on society must also be considered. On average one employed person supports about four or five other people, who are obviously affected by the epidemic. As a result, it is highly probable that there are now more than half a million Aids

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orphans in South Africa.

Considering the impact that the spread of the disease will have on the whole system of a business, it is obvious that no segment will remain unaffected. Finance sections of business will be affected because it is projected that profits will become more marginalised as production costs rise because of increased absenteeism. Marketing will be affected as clients struggle to retain and find skilled labour because of the impact of Aids. This will affect businesses that are struggling to survive and will seriously hamper the sustainability of new businesses in South Africa. Production will be affected as labour attendance becomes more erratic and skilled labour becomes scarcer. Human resource departments are affected because they are tasked with recruiting new staff from an ever-decreasing labour pool. An increase in workload will also result from increased death and medical claims.

Taking all of these factors into account, it seems rational to suggest that if we know the cause of the disease, we can implement measures to stop the behaviour that promotes HIV/Aids. It is possible to envisage certain actions being implemented that would result in the rate of transmission slowing down.

It is not such a simple matter, however, because we are talking about behaviour that is coupled with pleasure and procreation. We are dealing with cultural taboos, misguided perceptions and a lack of resources and knowledge. In addition, people are selfish in questioning why they should care when they are not directly affected. The biggest obstacle that I face when conducting training is the attitude that this disease is 'not my problem'. In addition, people believe that those who are infected somehow deserve it.

This perception - that only the guilty are infected - exists among business leaders and owners, as well as employees. The reality, however, is that innocent people are infected, innocent children are infected. The virus knows no class barriers, no race barriers, no distinction between rich and poor. Statistics reveal that 61% of HIV-infected people in South Africa became infected as a result of heterosexual sexual activity, four percent as a result of homosexual activity, one percent as a result of blood and blood-related products and nine percent as a result of mother-to-child transmission. In the remainder of the cases, the mode of transmission is unknown.

Despite all of these challenges and difficulties, businesses, as systems under threat are in a unique position to promote awareness and understanding about HIV/Aids. It is in this regard - with their access to the collective workforce -- that they can play a fundamental role. It is only through understanding that the behavioural patterns that continue to allow the disease to flourish can be attacked. It will also be through such understanding that we can 'decriminalise' HIV/Aids and confront the broad perception that only the 'guilty' are infected.

Businesses can implement awareness and training initiatives that will contribute greatly to the control of HIV/Aids and assist to ensure the continuation of their business. This might be viewed as developing social consciousness, but ultimately, it must be accepted that the stemming of HIV/Aids makes good business sense.

The first challenge is for a wide spectrum of businesses to acknowledge the impact that HIV/Aids is having and will continue to have on their activities. In this regard, increased absenteeism costs that may result from increased sick leave or time off work to attend funerals, for example, must be calculated according to a rand value cost. This cost will impact on the profitability of business and should be seen as seriously affecting on the continued economic sustainability of the business. Major corporations such as Anglo American have acknowledged the impact that this will have on

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their bottom line and are being proactive with regard to educating their top executives to see HIV/Aids as a very real threat. Unfortunately, Anglo-American is the exception to the rule.

Few of the Small Medium Macro Enterprises, or SMMEs, which make up 80% of businesses in South Africa, have considered the impact that the spread of the virus will have on their business. In acknowledging the threat of HIV/Aids, industries should take cognisance of the broader macro environment within which they operate.

To ensure that a workforce makes informed decisions about lifestyle, businesses need to promote HIV/Aids awareness training in the workplace. This training should be geared towards not only imparting knowledge and information but also at promoting understanding. It is only with understanding how Aids is spread, who is infected and how HIV-infected family members and friends should be treated, that the disease can be 'destigmatised' or brought out of the closet.

At a minimum HIV/Aids training should focus on modes of transmission, preventative measures, symptoms, availability of Aids tests, treatment of fellow colleagues, workers rights and avenues for accessing additional information. Businesses should set up regular condom distribution schemes for their employees and make sure that they have literature available for further education. In terms of the code of good practice for HIV/Aids, businesses need to take cognisance of the rights of HIV/Aids-infected employees and actively promote their rights in the workplace. It is also a good idea to appoint an individual in the organisation should any worker need assistance regarding HIV/Aids issues. It should be spelt out to the employee that no worker is required to submit to an HIV test. Furthermore, information on HIV status that is disclosed by an employee to an employer must be kept confidential. Information geared at improving the quality of life of HIV positive individuals should also be kept at hand.

To ensure compliance with anti-discriminatory legislation in place in South Africa, businesses need to amend their policies and procedures regarding life-threatening diseases. It is recommended that they formulate a policy covering job access, workplace testing, confidentiality, job placement, job status, job security, occupational benefits, training, risk reduction, first aid, workers compensation, education and awareness, prevention programmes, managing illness, protection against discrimination, grievance handling and monitoring and review. A surprising number of businesses have policies and procedures in place that do not comply with legislation such as the Labour Relations Act, the Employment Equity Act, the Medical Schemes Act, the Occupational Health and Safety Act of the Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act. There are further legislative incentives in place for companies that embark on HIV/Aids awareness training. Details about these incentives are contained within the legislation governing workplace skills plans. HIV/Aids awareness training has been identified as a national skills priority for which companies can receive an additional rebate in terms of the skills levies that they pay.

Many companies allocate resources annually for social responsibility programmes. Typically these funds would be used to support charities, schools or housing projects. Given the prevalence of the disease, it is recommended that companies look at financing community-based HIV/Aids awareness training programmes. Companies typically recruit future staff members from within the community surrounding their workplace and should at the very least be prepared to assist these communities to prevent the disease from decimating the pool of available labour. Not only would these types of programmes be good for the community, but it also makes good business sense to invest in the labour pool of tomorrow.

In addition to company representatives such as human resources managers, who tend to be aware of the issues that need to be addressed, senior management must also begin to take HIV/Aids seriously. Any programme is going to fail unless they are committed to the process and

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acknowledge the urgency of the situation.

Big corporations like Anglo American have also taken the lead through the provision of free or subsidised anti-retroviral drugs because the burden for the provision of these drugs cannot be borne solely by government. Given that there are estimated to be more than 4,2 million HIV-infected people in South Africa today, the task is simply too huge for any government. There is no doubt that such drugs provide a higher quality of life to HIV-infected people.

This is where companies also bear responsibility in order to assist those employees who are already infected. The average HIV-infected person can live for six years or longer provided that they have access to the correct nutritional information and drugs. Business needs to deal with the living victims of the epidemic and should be proactive in assisting such employees to achieve a better state of health. The higher quality of life and state of health enjoyed by these employees will dramatically impact on their productivity within the workplace.

Businesses, along with other members of South African society, need to be proactive enough to fight for the rights of the future generations of South Africans. The words of President Thabo Mbeki spoken in 1998 bring home the reality of the situation: "For too long we have closed our eyes as a nation, hoping the truth was not so real. For many years we have allowed the human immunodeficiency virus to spread...At times we did not know that we were burying people who had died from Aids. At other times we knew, but chose to remain silent. Now we face the danger that half of our youth will not reach adulthood. Their education will be wasted. The economy will shrink. There will be a large number of sick people whom the healthy will have to maintain. Our dreams as a people will be shattered."

Donna Stevenson is a human resources and labour specialist currently studying a Masters Philosophy degree in Future Studies. Her background is in human resources in the security industry.

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