

Comment from Roderick Lim Banda, Chair of the Digital Portfolio Committee of the Cape Chamber of Commerce.

The Cape Chamber of Commerce and Industry calls on government to consider some of the more fundamental issues relating to the information communication technology (ICT) sector after the media and social media reaction to the appointment of the President's daughter as Chief of Staff in the newly re-structured ministry of post and telecommunications.

“The government needs to carefully consider why the appointment sends the wrong message and why it needs to review the importance of strong technical leadership in this sector” says Roderick Lim Banda, Chair of the Digital Portfolio Committee of the Cape Chamber.

Technology and innovation is the most critical driver of economic growth in the 21st century and demands high levels of technical skills such as software programming, computer science, electrical and network engineering. But as a country we are struggling to uplift the technical skills in an environment of increasing unemployment.

Our local technology sectors should be a driver for economic growth but have struggled to create the kind of impact needed to address our growing youth unemployment. We need to understand why. Part of this is systemic in that our telecommunications industry is still hindered by the state owned or controlled monopolies and enterprises. During the apartheid era, these state assets were used to support minority families and households with job opportunities. Today, the state continues to compete with the private sector and while the intent is to address inequality, it is a structural impediment to the growth of small businesses that can provide opportunities for mass participation in the economy.

Government has made available large funds for enterprise development and skills training. But the gap is in the opportunities that enable youths to gain experience through internships and apprenticeships. Rigid labour laws restrict the nature of employment and do not support the creation and resourcing of projects as temporary work that technology companies depend upon to develop skills through experience. Project work creates stepping stone job opportunities for employment, self-employment and entrepreneurship.

Infrastructure development such as broadband has been highly politicized and the Cape Chamber is concerned that this is driven by large capital expenditure budgets rather than development of skills and human capital. Make no mistake; access to broadband is very important for the development of any country. But the much quoted global precedent of 10% growth in GDP resulting from the laying of optic fibre networks across the country is unrealistic. Given the lack of density and skills, South Africa is likely to see less than 1% in the shorter term even if we managed to complete all these infrastructure projects. To realize the potential of economic growth in the technology sector, we need to focus on skills development particularly through small businesses and temporary projects that facilitates the gaining of experience.

South Africa suffers from a dearth of Information Technology skills. Persons with the

relevant skills are highly sought after and often command extremely expensive salaries which, in turn, result in business struggling to manage their Information Technology needs in a competitive manner.

Last year the Department of Basic Education circulated proposed standardization of software tools and programming language in the senior band of grades 10 to 12 which were widely opposed. It was only after massive and co-ordinated opposition to this decision (which included the Cape Chamber of Commerce's Digital Portfolio Committee) that this policy was reversed. The past year has also seen some progress made by the previous Minister Yunis Cassim after the much publicized and damaging period from previous appointments including that of the former Minister Dina Pule.

It is against this background that we read with dismay the recent appointment of the President's daughter, Thuthukile Zuma as Chief of Staff in the new telecommunications department. Our dismay stems not only from the appointment of a person who cannot claim to have the requisite experience to occupy an important post in a vital department, but also from the message that this sends to learners and job hunters in South Africa. The message quite simply is this: "It does not matter what training and experience you have. What really matters is who you know, not what you know".

That this is the message sent by the Department of Post and Telecommunications at this stage is particularly disheartening. As a Chamber of Commerce, we seek to promote learning, training, experience and accountability in South African employees. Even if Thuthukile Zuma were to do an excellent job – and the chances of this are not good – the new telecommunications ministry and by extension the South African government is actively demotivating learners to study hard and obtain work experience if – in the long run – it just doesn't matter.

This kind of action also heralds a more insidious problem. Some of our brightest talents are opting for softer skills and aspire towards management positions rather than building a career that relies on a longer and harder learning curve. They do this based on their actual experience that this is more likely to land them a lucrative, undemanding position. It also takes our talent away from hard technical skills which we dearly need.

The progress made by previous Minister Yunis Cassim, provided some signs of hope for a more accountable department that regulates a highly technical sector. Despite whatever rationale is conveyed in words, the action of recent appointments and changes by the President will not foster business confidence in a key public sector that has a recent and long history of exploitation by political appointments. Government must set the example not only in terms of accountability and governance but in the appointment of technical leadership in key positions where the necessary experience and vision is critical in driving programs that can build both human capital and infrastructure.