

talking point

DEGREES OF SUCCESS

South Africa is a country with endless possibilities and a dire need for skilled workers – so why are so many recent graduates unemployed? By **Kanyisa Mavi**

after the gown, mortarboards in the air, paper in hand and motivating melodies of 'Gaudeamus Igitur', it's off to conquer the world. That may be the plan for some graduates in Mzansi, but for a growing number, the reality is them bouncing from one temp job to the next, searching newspapers daily and dealing with the stigma and disappointment of being yet another statistic – one of South Africa's more than 200 000 jobless graduates.

Three young women who cannot find permanent employment in their fields of study, despite having five degrees among them from some of the country's top institutions, share their stories.

MAMELA SIWENDU, 24, Dutywa, Eastern Cape



QUALIFICATIONS:

Bachelor of Social Science (organisational psychology, social anthropology); post-graduate qualification in human resources studies

INSTITUTION: UCT

'I studied for four years. My goal when I left varsity was to get a job in human resources – I really love working with people.

After graduating, I did a year's internship at Blue Weaver Marketing. That was great because it gave me a chance to gain some experience. While I was there, I kept applying for positions in other companies. I went for numerous interviews and got some call-backs – without any luck. When the internship ended, that was it. I didn't have a job.

'I was very disappointed, I still am. When I was a student, I never thought this would happen to me. I always took it for granted that I'd get a job. Now that it's happening I can't help but wonder what is wrong with me. All the friends that I graduated with have jobs, so why haven't I been able to find one?

'It's extremely hard watching everyone else living large and buying new cars while I'm still buying the paper, looking for work. Although my family is very supportive, some friends think I'm slacking and not looking hard enough. They don't understand how frustrating it is. I feel like my life is at a standstill.

'I've thought about leaving the country and maybe going to the UK. The thing is, I don't know if I could stand working at a restaurant or something because I'm too qualified for that. I have bigger dreams and goals that I've set for myself.'

LIZA VAN WYK, CEO OF TRAINING COMPANY

BIZTECH COMMENTS: 'Many companies take people on as a temp or intern because they're cautious and want you to prove yourself before they create expectations of permanent employment. No matter how temporary the position, you have to put everything into the job. Most employers are crying out for top performers and often, if you show that you have the right attitude and work ethic, opportunities will emerge.'

'Mamele says that while she was doing her internship at Blue Weaver Marketing she "kept applying for positions in other companies". Sometimes temporary employees use company infrastructure such as internet access and fax machines and spend company time searching for alternative employment. This can discourage the employer where you're interning from

talking point

STATS

considering you for a permanent position. In addition, job-hunting interns may take time off, or call in sick, to attend interviews. This may raise questions about your work ethic or integrity or your commitment to the company. At the end of the internship they may therefore let the candidate go while they continue their search for committed employees with the right attitude.

'Finding a job needs to be treated as a job in itself; nothing is going to "come up" without tremendous time and effort. The fact that Mamela is based in Dutywa can also limit her opportunities.

Recruitment agents and employers want to meet candidates and may overlook an applicant from a remote location in favour of others right on their doorstep.

'Mamela says she doesn't know if she "could stand working at a restaurant" because she's "too qualified for that". She should know that almost any experience is better for your career than doing nothing.

'Six months ago we hired a young lady in our offices as a cleaner. She is now an administrative assistant and we're enrolling her for a series of computer courses. If she hadn't taken on the cleaning role and if she hadn't performed it well and with energy and enthusiasm, we would never have considered her for the new challenge.'

ANDISIWE MBANGATA, 24, Cape Town



QUALIFICATIONS:

BA in marketing (media and brand management)

INSTITUTION:

AAA School of Advertising
'I didn't know much about my three-year course when I started it. I thought it was just marketing, the same thing they offer at technikons. I didn't even realise I'd have to specialise.

'After my graduation I did a four-month internship at *You and Huisgenoot*. Unfortunately, they didn't have any vacancies but there was a post within Media24 for a media analyst, and I applied for it. I went for the interview and it looked very promising. The interviewer spoke to me afterwards and said I was impressive. Nonetheless, I didn't get the job.

'I applied for a position as brand team assistant at FCB where I got the interview, but not the job. Then I went to Ogilvy and, while their decision was pending,

'Finding a job needs to be treated as a job in itself; nothing is going to "come up" without tremendous time and effort'

- There are **4.4 million** unemployed adults in South Africa. A third of them have been looking for work for three years or more.
- There are **4 million** economically active South Africans aged 15 to 24. Of these, **2.6 million** (64%) are unemployed.
- According to Stats SA, in 2004 it was estimated that there were **60 000** unemployed graduates. Last year that number jumped to **200 000**. [Labour Force Survey, September 2007]

I landed a job as client liaison officer at Cape Media. I didn't enjoy it at all; it wasn't what I wanted to do.

'After I left Cape Media, I was out of work for three months and it was a huge frustration. Having to stay at home every day, not earning a cent, still having to call my mom for groceries or toiletry money was hard. You know, you hear about BEE and you think you're guaranteed a job, but that's not how things work. My family was quite disappointed, and after so much time, effort and money invested in my studies, I don't blame them. I was just as disappointed.

'Eventually I decided to just find anything that would earn me a living and I did. It's not exactly what I would've loved to do, but that's how things have worked out for me. At least now I know that at the end of the month I'll have a pay check.

'I'm overworked and underpaid, but I won't complain - I know what it feels like to be completely penniless. I'm still looking for a position in media or brand management because that's what I want to do. The bottom line now is that I'm working and not sitting at home waiting for a miracle, even though I'm unhappy.'

LIZA COMMENTS: 'I think Andisiwe learned a tough lesson after leaving Cape Media, which is that no matter how unhappy you are in your job, it is usually still much better than not having a job and it'll contribute to your skills development so that at a later stage you can look for your ideal job.

'Companies often view applicants who have worked for a company for a very short time as job-hoppers. Also, to leave a company with no alternative employment makes companies suspicious. Does it mean you don't have good control of your emotions and stormed out? Does it mean you have no sense of responsibility? Does it mean you were asked to leave? When you're starting your career and have very few skills to offer an employer, the last thing a company >

talking point

wants to do is spend time and money developing your skills, just so you can leave for another job when you eventually do become productive.

'Andisiwe says she didn't know much about her course when she enrolled, and this is true for many graduates. The good news is that this is often not a big inhibitor in your career development. Many people find that once they enter the workplace and get exposed to what really is out there, they find a new passion where they can use their skills and training. They also develop new skills and very often end up achieving in a field they may never have dreamed of. I studied electronic engineering at university, but now own and manage a training company.'

LYDIA MAKGOMO, 24, Johannesburg



QUALIFICATIONS:

BA in media studies; honours in linguistics

INSTITUTION:

Wits University
'After studying for four years, I approached recruitment agencies to find a job; I registered with about five of them. I went through countless interviews but none of them produced any results. Some were actually completely irrelevant to

what I'd studied or the kind of job I was looking for.

'I didn't want to sit without a job, so I did a few temp jobs, including working at a pharmaceutical company and working for an IT company on a contract basis for a few months. It got really frustrating because having these temp jobs kept me from doing a lot of things I wanted to do, like saving. I was unemployed for a while and it was hard.

'My mother's a realist and she wasn't very optimistic about me finding a job in the field I'd studied. I don't understand why I couldn't get a job, actually, because it's not like there aren't any available. I think part of it was my stupidity because I didn't research job opportunities in what I was studying. I also think there's a breakdown somewhere between tertiary institutions and the job market. There are plenty of jobs, but students are not advised about where the demand for workers actually lies.

'Eventually I snapped out of feeling sorry for myself and decided to get out and find a job. I went to Standard Bank and nagged forever until eventually they gave me a temp position as the assistant to the bank manager. It was only supposed to be for a short time, but I worked so hard that I became permanent. I know that I'm overqualified for this job, but it's a step forward.'

LIZA COMMENTS: 'Lydia has a nice success story. She was willing to be flexible in terms of the type of work she undertook, she took control of her situation and was persistent until she got herself a job. And when she did, she put everything she had into it. Now her future is looking much brighter and this represents a prime example of how a less-than-perfect position has been used as a stepping stone for one that looks even better than what she was originally looking for.'

'Graduates could learn from the initiative that Lydia has displayed. The key is that you need to prove yourself first before you can expect opportunities to come your way.' •

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Liza van Wyk, CEO of training company BizTech.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN REASONS FOR THE HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT RATE AMONG YOUNG GRADUATES?

One of the main reasons is that when students leave tertiary institutions to enter the workplace, they don't have the skills to make the transition from student to employee. They might have a good theoretical background, but a lot of them lack the life skills that are needed to function in the workplace.

Another reason is that companies are not willing to invest in people. They want ready-made workers with experience instead of bringing people in and coaching them. And a big problem is that many graduates, as well as employees, lack assertiveness and confidence. Personality goes a long way when looking for a job.

DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE FOR UNEMPLOYED GRADUATES?

I'd advise them to take responsibility for their own careers. Companies can't be expected to look after you when you don't do the same for yourself. Personal motivation is what it's about.

THE ROLE OF THE RECRUITMENT AGENT

Ethel Labuschagne, branch manager of Recruitment Direct.

WHAT IS THE JOB OF A RECRUITMENT AGENT?

Our job is to fit a profile of the candidate to the job spec as well as match the personality of the candidate to the culture of the company. Because

talking point

MAKE THE MOST OF...

MYTH BUSTER

'Your belief that you'll be discriminated against because you are black/female/Jewish/Muslim/disabled/a white male, can lead to your own fears realising themselves, not because of the discrimination of others, but because of your own negative self-programming. Know yourself, know the things you do to hold yourself back, and work on changing them. I've learned that profits are derived from relationships, not transactions.'

– CEO of Tsogo Sun, Jabu Mabuza

most graduates have no experience, we pair them up with companies based on their personalities, communication skills and on their professionalism.

WHAT ARE THE THINGS GRADUATES SHOULD CONSIDER WHEN APPROACHING A RECRUITMENT AGENCY? Don't just go to a recruitment agency and wait. In your third year, look for internships and spend some time working for a couple of hours a day at a company. This helps to get experience, which is what employers are looking for. Every little bit helps.

WHICH INDUSTRIES NEED SKILLS THE MOST? We are a generalist recruitment agency, which means we cover just about all industries. Based on what we've found, there aren't enough black chartered accountants. There aren't enough skilled people in the construction industry and the IT industry needs people all round, from developers to technical staff.

It's not easy for people who are looking to get into HR, marketing and media to get jobs easily – often they're a bit narrow-minded in their job-seeking. Just because you studied HR doesn't mean you'll get into a management position as soon as you leave school. Sometimes you might find yourself ending up in a marketing position instead. Take that and learn from it because it's experience and a step towards where you want to be. You might even find that you like the job and you have a better future if you continue with it.

DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE FOR UNEMPLOYED GRADUATES? Remember that you're still at the bottom. A degree, diploma or whatever you have doesn't mean you're going straight to the top position and will earn a fat salary. You must be prepared to work your way up.

YOUR INTERNSHIP

- **Know what you want to get out of this internship** and work towards getting it. Make sure that when you leave, you have something tangible to add to your CV or portfolio.
- **Approach it with a positive and enthusiastic attitude**, whatever skivvy jobs you're required to do, even if it's making coffee. Be the best coffee maker there ever was.
- **Do some exploring.** Visit other departments and offer to help out wherever you can. Learn more about what other people are doing within the company. Make yourself visible and make some contacts.

STEPPING-STONE JOBS

- **Stepping-stone jobs can be a blessing in disguise.** An admin position, for example, gives you an excellent grasp of how the business works. Use this to your advantage. It's not enough just to want a higher position. You must know exactly where it is you want to be so that you can figure out the most effective means of getting there.
- **Be someone new.** If you were their boss, would you want to hire someone like you? Think, act and approach your work like you already have the job you want. Change how others look at you.
- **Network.** Meet and familiarise yourself with co-workers and managerial staff in your department and in the department where you see yourself working in future. Take initiative and help out after hours – show interest in your future job.

YOUR RECRUITMENT AGENCY

- **Build a relationship with your recruitment agent.** Be nice to them and they'll be nice to you. If they like you, they'll remember you and do their best to find you a job.
- **Be clear.** It will be easier to find you a job if you clearly explain what you want. Be careful not to be too narrow-minded, though. As a new graduate, you will not get the top position – no matter what degree you have. Choose something that allows you room to work your way up.
- **Be quick.** The minute you get that call about an opportunity, respond immediately.