XPATWEB
Work Permit & Expatriate Solutions

CRITICAL SKILLS SURVEY REPORT 2025

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In today's fast-changing global economy, demand for critical skills is intensifying across all sectors, mostly driven by technological advances. Governments and industries are increasingly focusing on evidence-based strategies to identify, develop and attract the skills needed for sustainable growth.

Despite a global trend toward tighter immigration laws, recognising skilled talent as an economic driver can be a strategic advantage for countries that urgently need it.

The 2025 Xpatweb Critical Skills Survey, now in its eighth year, remains the most comprehensive labour market survey among multinationals and large corporations in South Africa. It provides up-to-date insights into the country's skills shortages and the role of foreign talent in addressing the gaps.

In previous years, Xpatweb survey findings, in collaboration with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the Department of Home Affairs (DHA), helped shape the National Critical Skills List. This list underpins the Critical Skills Work Visa system, instrumental in simplifying the recruitment of qualified foreign professionals.

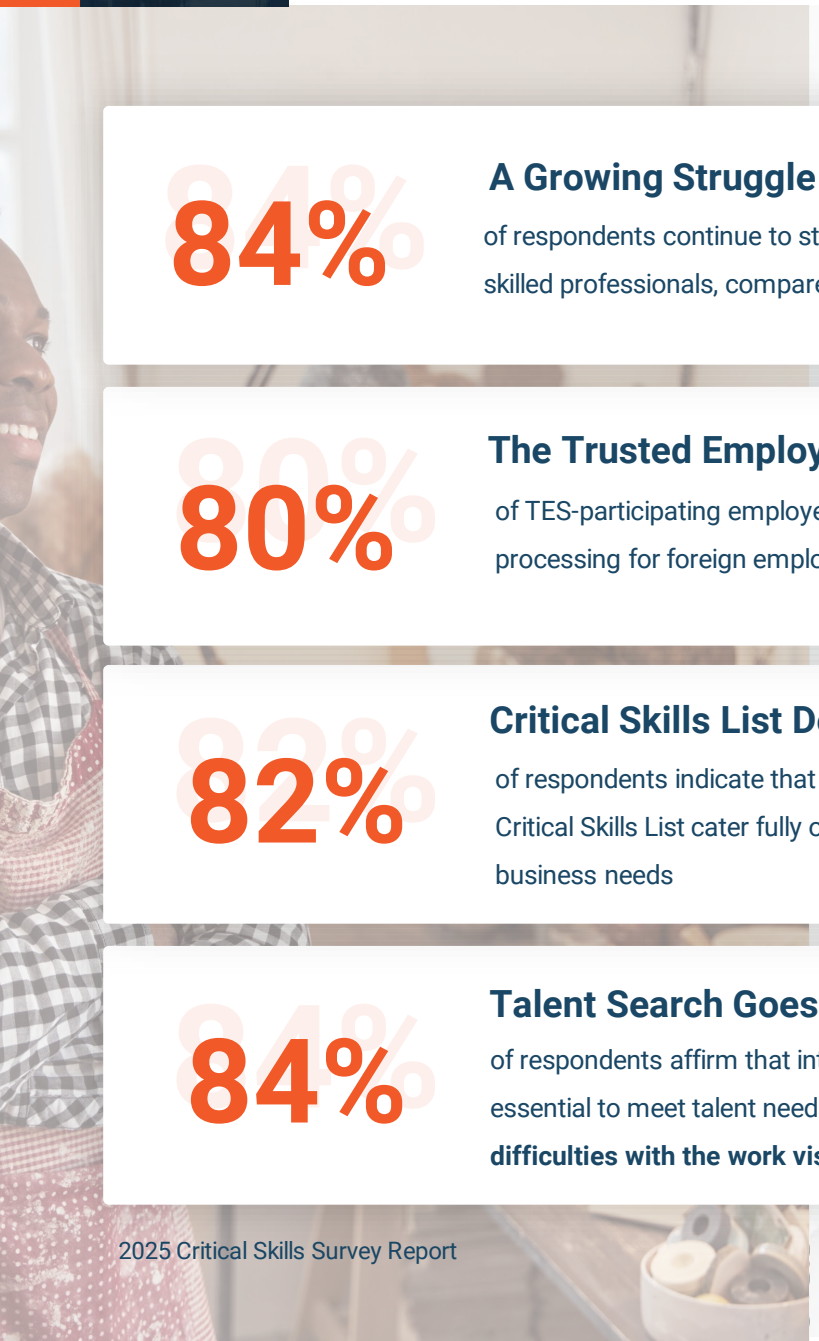
> After ending loadshedding, attracting more skills to the South African economy is the second most powerful intervention the country can embark on to kickstart growth.
>
> ***— Dr. Leon Schreiber, Minister of Home Affairs, citing National Treasury research***

Number of Respondents

381

Including JSE-listed companies and large multinational groups.

higher education & training
Department:
Higher Education and Training
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



84%

A Growing Struggle to Recruit Locally

of respondents continue to struggle to recruit critically skilled professionals, compared to **79% in 2024**

80%

The Trusted Employer Scheme

of TES-participating employers report improved visa processing for foreign employees

82%

Critical Skills List Delivers

of respondents indicate that the occupations on the Critical Skills List cater fully or to some degree for their business needs

84%

Talent Search Goes Global

of respondents affirm that international recruitment is essential to meet talent needs, although **77% cite difficulties with the work visa process**

The top 10 hardest-to-fill roles in 2025 remain largely unchanged from 2024, but the severity of some of the shortages has intensified.

Engineers, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) specialists, artisans, and financial experts continue to top the list, underscoring a persistent skills gap. This report explores these shortages, their impact on business operations, and challenges faced in recruiting foreign talent.

Looking ahead, skills in AI, data analytics, security, and technology will be crucial for South Africa's competitiveness. Research by the World Economic Forum (WEF) states that skills related to AI, data analytics, cybersecurity and technological literacy are projected to grow faster than any other category.

The 2025 Xpatweb Critical Skills Survey Report offers a clear, evidence-based roadmap for employers and policymakers. It supports informed decision-making in workforce development, immigration reform, and economic strategy — ensuring that South Africa remains resilient, competitive, and future-ready.

2 FROM DATA TO POLICY

HOW THE CRITICAL SKILLS WORK VISA ADDRESSES SOUTH AFRICA'S SKILLS GAPS

South Africa introduced the Critical Skills Work Visa in 2014 to address ongoing shortages of skilled professionals and strengthen economic growth. Building on this, a new skilled visa framework was launched in 2024 to attract global talent, support local job creation, and improve investor confidence.

This framework includes:

- The **Trusted Employer Scheme** (TES), which fast-tracks visa processing for pre-approved employers; and
- A **Points-Based System** that brings greater clarity and transparency to Critical Skills and General Work visa applications.

At its core is the National Critical Skills List, identifying high-demand occupations which will benefit from a streamlined visa application process. This List must be regularly updated to reflect current business needs. The Xpatweb Critical Skills Survey provides crucial, real-world data from employers to inform updates to ensure South Africa can attract the skills vital for inclusive economic growth.

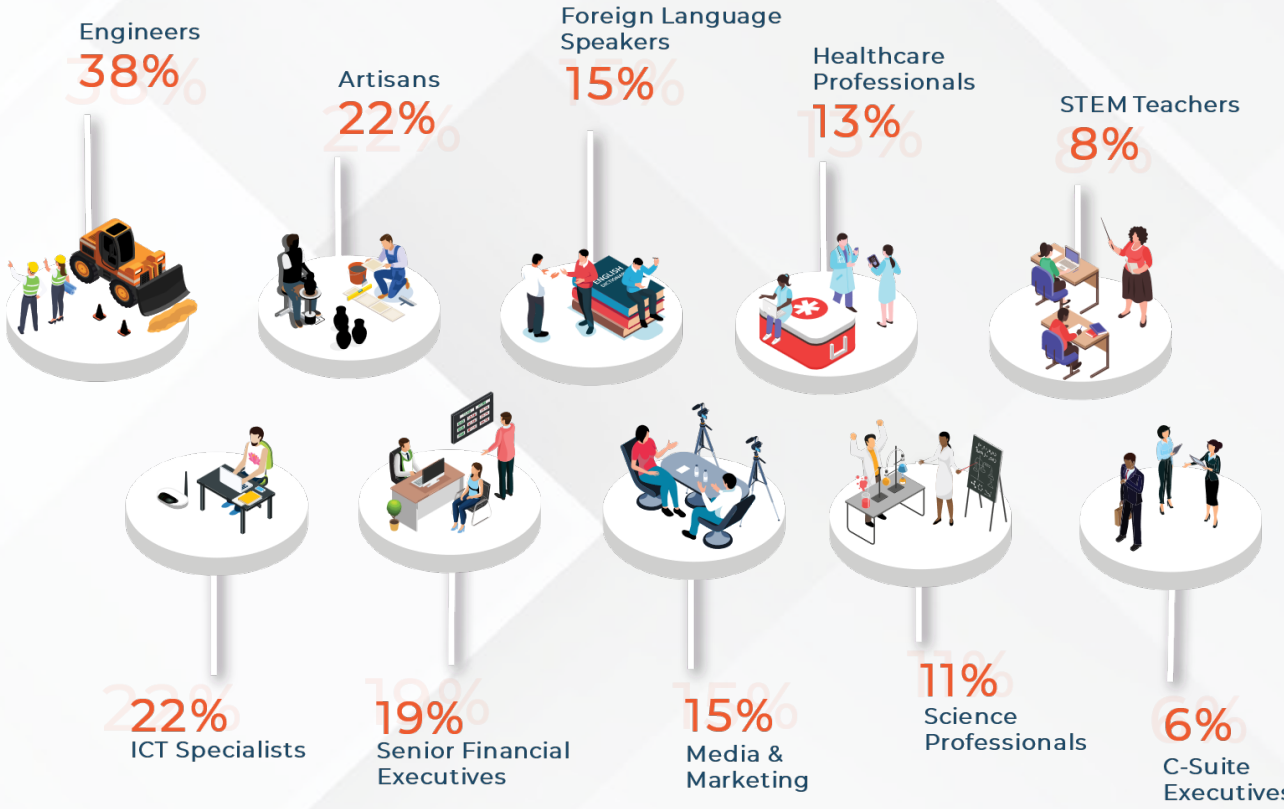
The list has evolved several times since its inception, with an updated version expected in 2026 to align with the country's changing labour priorities.

> "FOR EVERY HIGHLY SKILLED EMPLOYEE BROUGHT INTO THE COUNTRY, SEVEN UNSKILLED JOBS ARE CREATED.
>
> - Ashor Sarupen, Deputy Minister of Finance

3 CRITICAL SKILLS SHORTAGES

TOP 10 OCCUPATIONS MOST DIFFICULT TO RECRUIT IN SOUTH AFRICA

Skills shortages are intensifying, **with 9 out of the top 10** critical areas showing increases of between 2 and 15 percentage points since 2024.



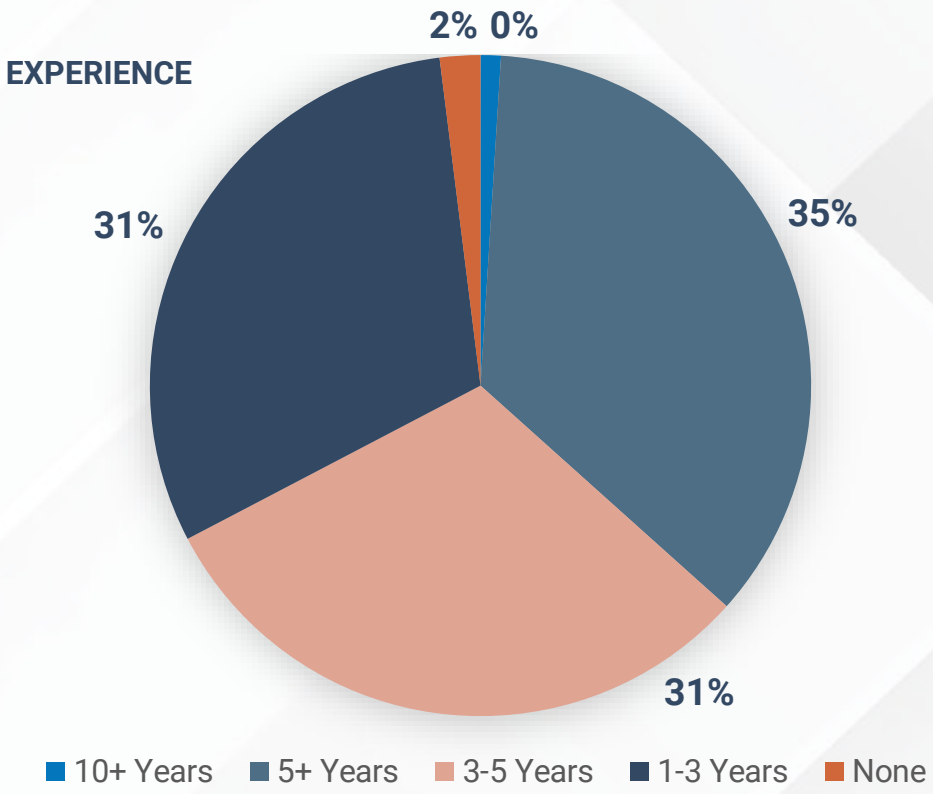
**The total number of respondents includes multiple areas of skills shortages selected by participants.*

BREAKDOWN PER EXPERIENCE AND QUALIFICATIONS

The industry breakdown offers an in-depth view of the experience and qualification levels across South Africa's top hardest-to-fill skills. This analysis reveals how differing levels of expertise and education contribute to the national talent gap — highlighting where highly qualified and experienced professionals are most in demand.

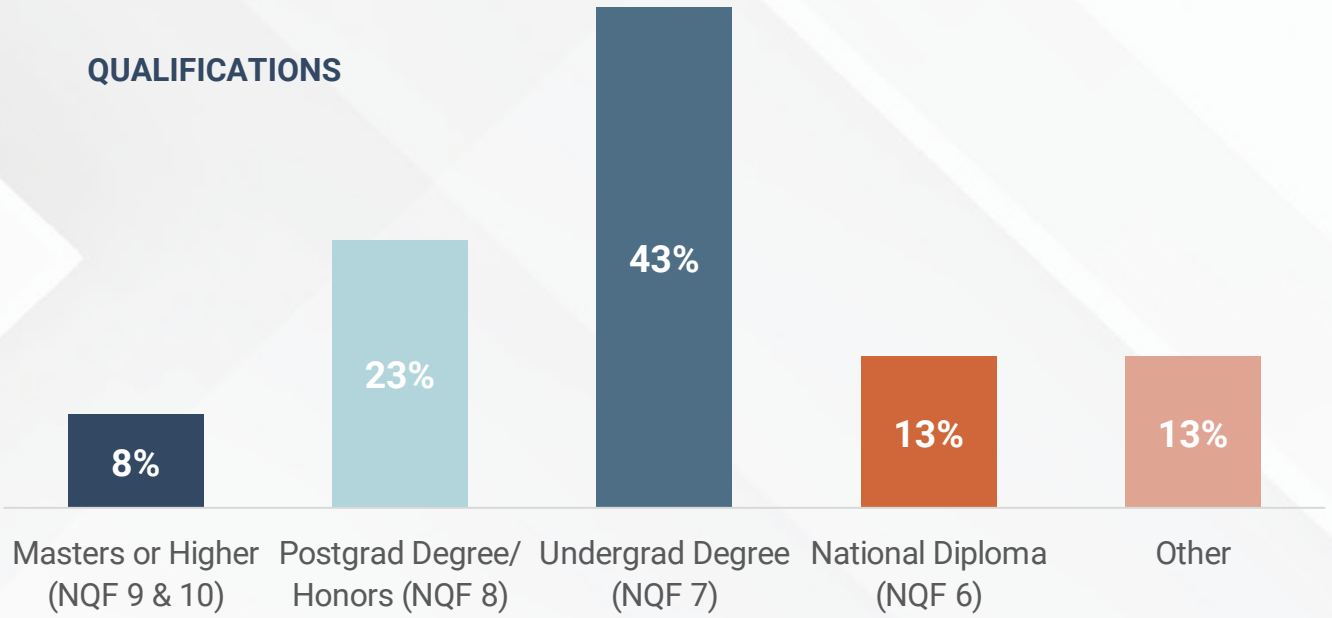
ENGINEERING

SEARCH IS ON FOR QUALIFIED, EXPERIENCED ENGINEERS



ENGINEERING OCCUPATIONS MOST SOUGHT AFTER

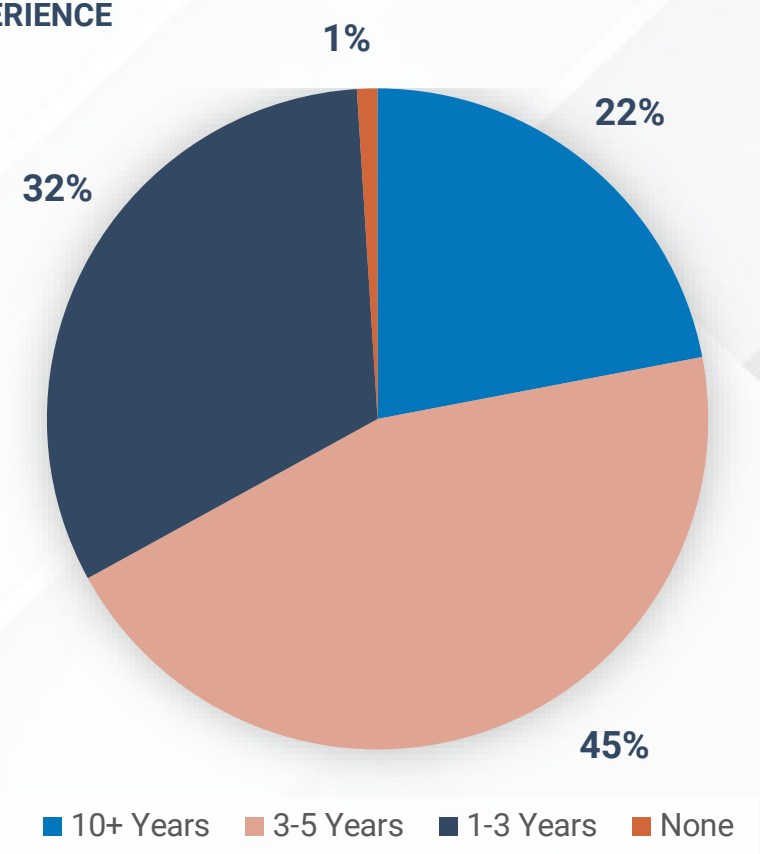
- Chemical
- Mechanical
- Industrial
- Civil
- Automation
- Maintenance
- Energy
- Electronic Engineering Technician
- Mechanical Engineering Technician



ICT SPECIALISTS

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES FAVOUR ICT EXPERTS

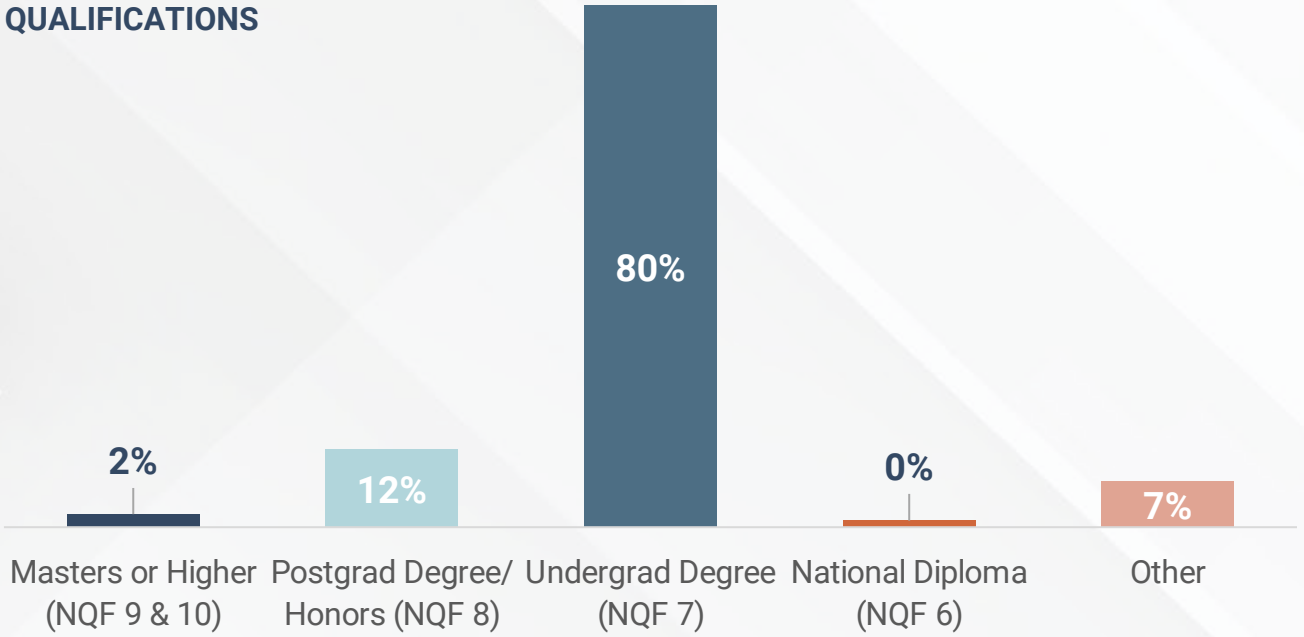
EXPERIENCE



OCCUPATIONS MOST IN DEMAND

- Data Analyst
- Data Scientist
- IT Engineer
- Software Developer
- Software Engineer
- ICT Manager
- ICT Systems Analyst

QUALIFICATIONS

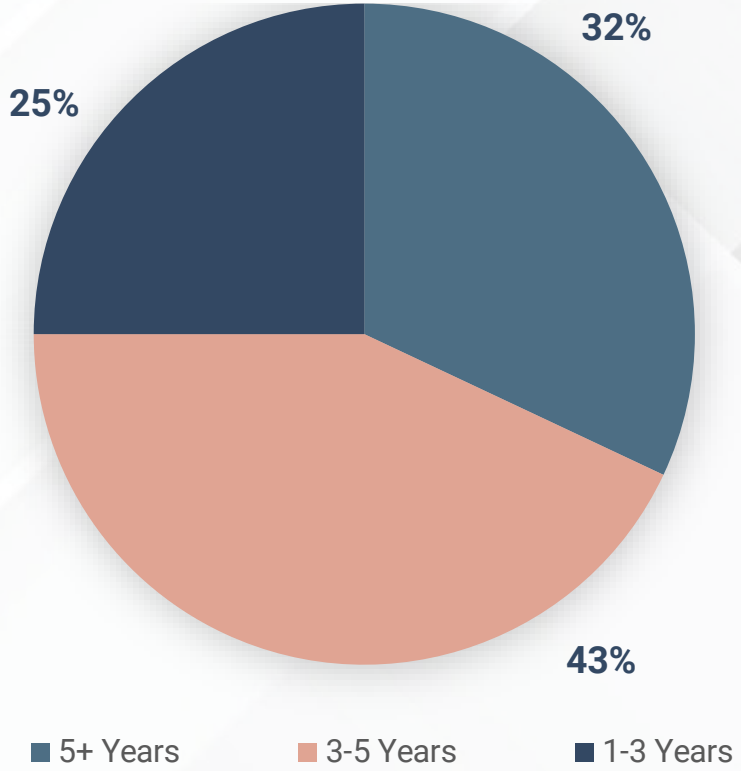


22% of respondents require a minimum experience level of 10 years, while 77% require 1 – 5 years' experience. 94% have a minimum requirement of NQF level 7 or above.

ARTISANS

DEMAND OUTPACES SUPPLY

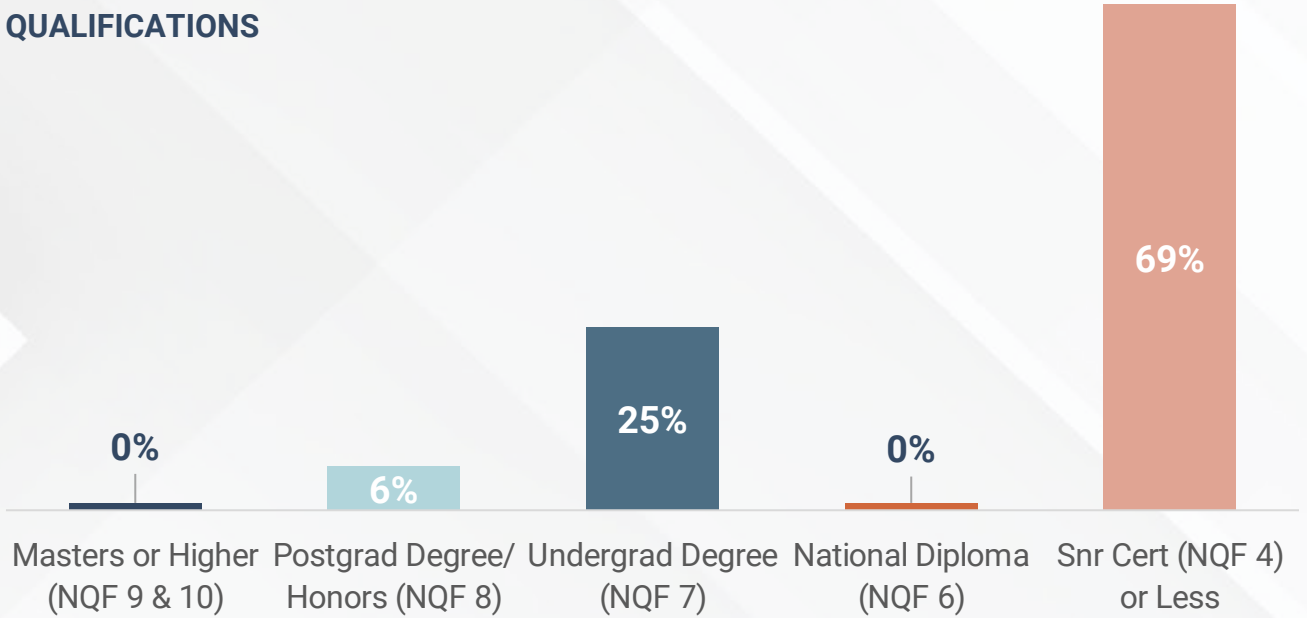
EXPERIENCE



OCCUPATIONS MOST IN DEMAND

- Millwright
- Electrician
- Fitter and Turner
- Instrumentation Specialist
- Automation Specialist

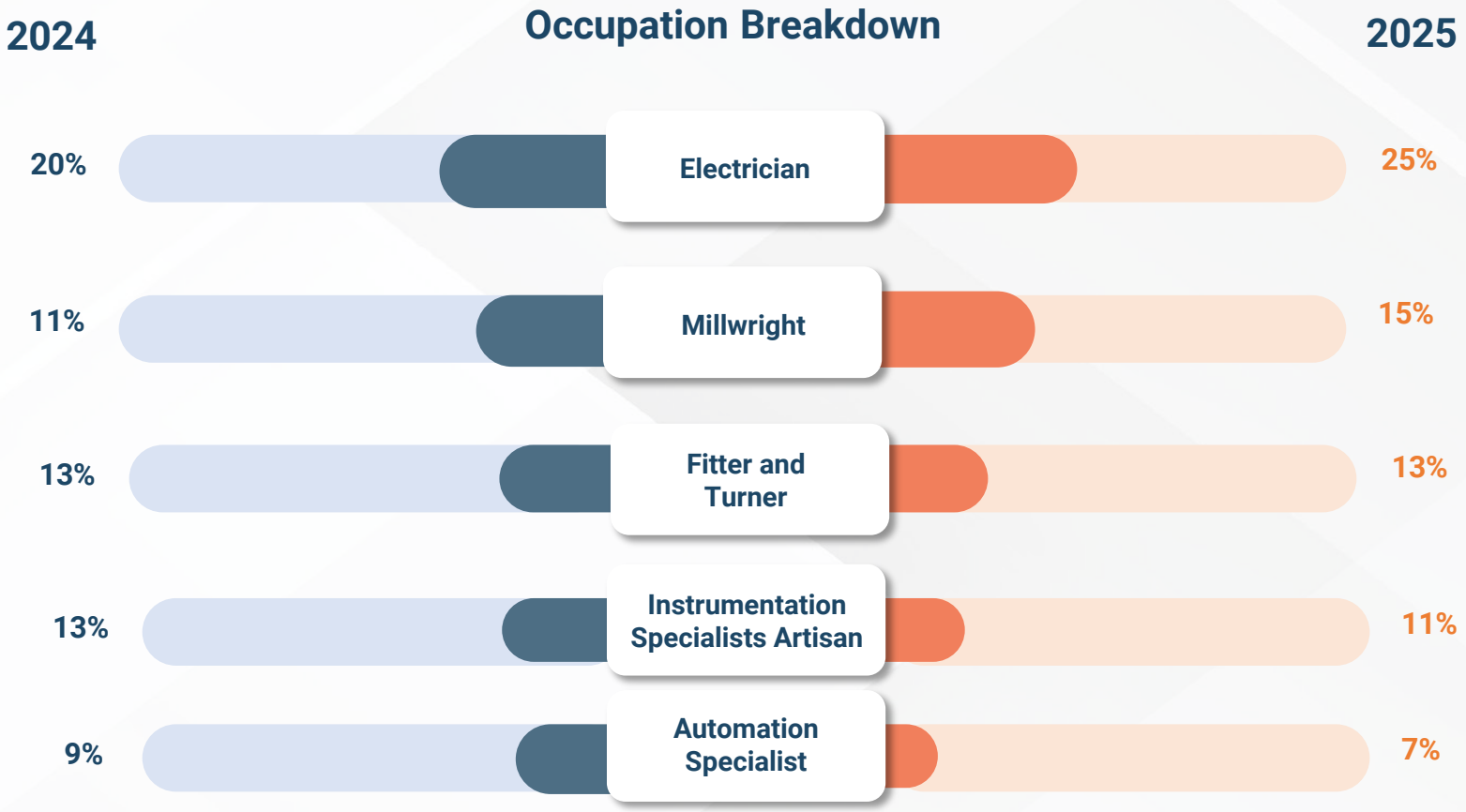
QUALIFICATIONS



All respondents are looking for between 1 and 5 years' experience, 69% require a NQF level of 4 or less.

ARTISANS

DEMAND OUTPACES SUPPLY

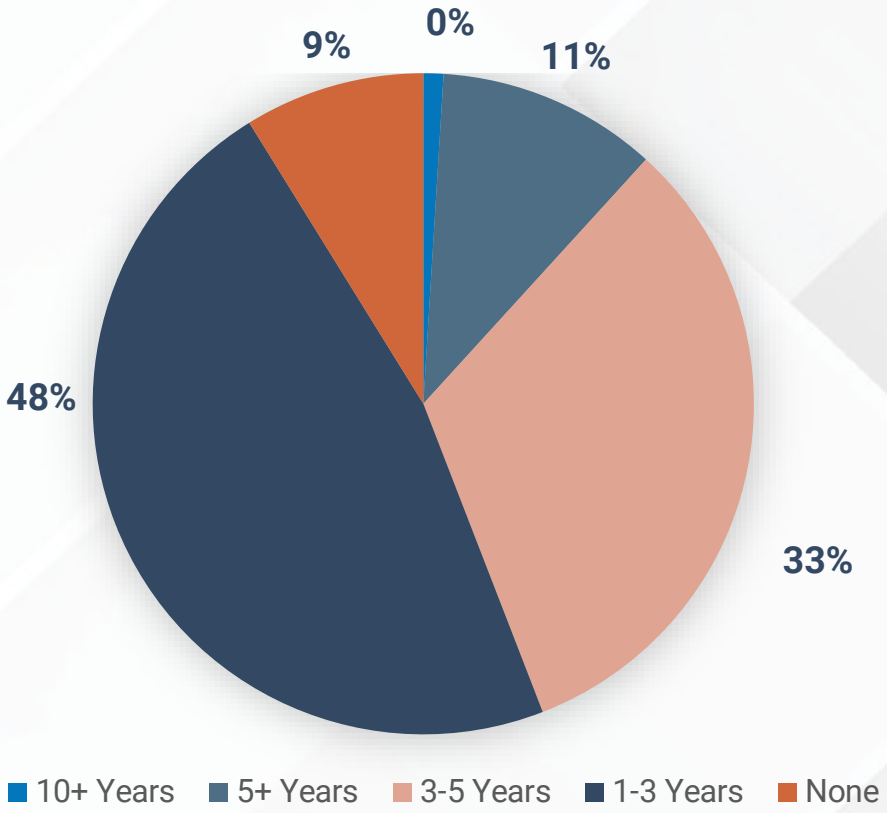


The 2025 survey shows an increase in demand for Electricians and Millwrights, a slight decrease in demand for Instrumentation Specialist Artisans and Automation Specialists, and no change for Fitters and Turners.

MEDIA & MARKETING

ONBOARDING GRADUATES WITH ON-THE-JOB EXPERIENCE

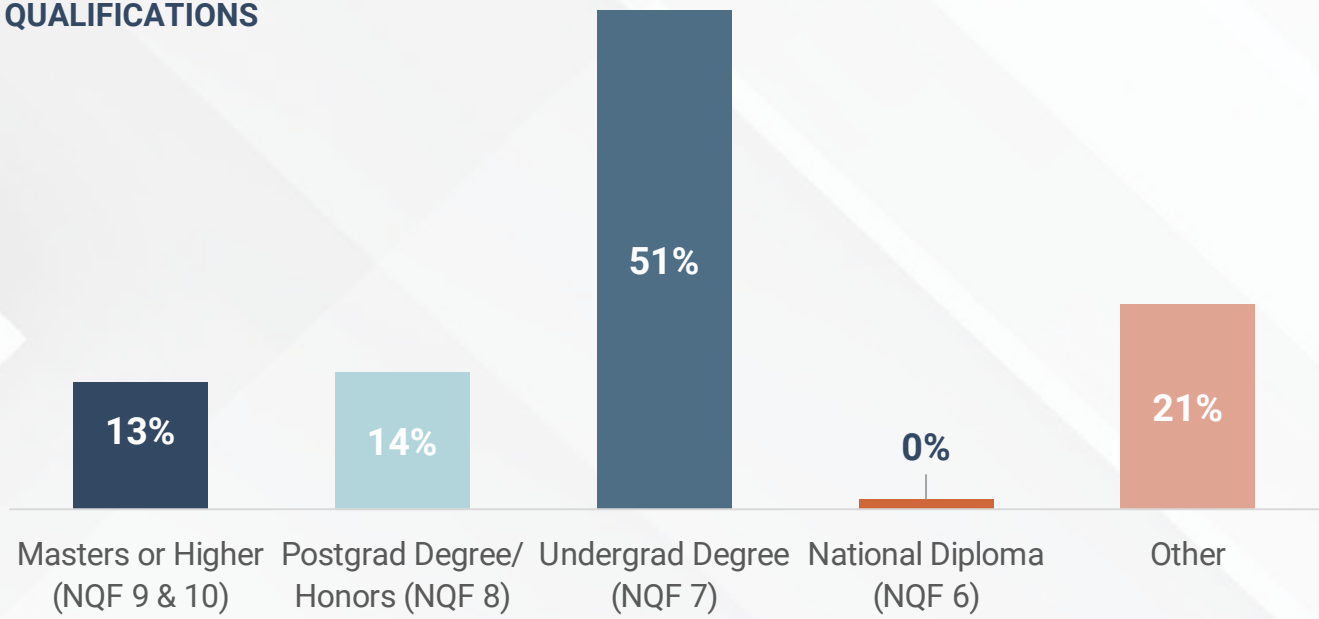
EXPERIENCE



OCCUPATIONS MOST IN DEMAND

- Media Specialist
- Brand and Category Marketing Manager
- Creative Designer
- Media Strategist
- Digital Media Strategist/Analyst
- Sales and Marketing Professional

QUALIFICATIONS



While 48% of participants want media specialists with 1 to 3 years' experience, 9% are willing to appoint employees without experience in this field.

MEDIA & MARKETING

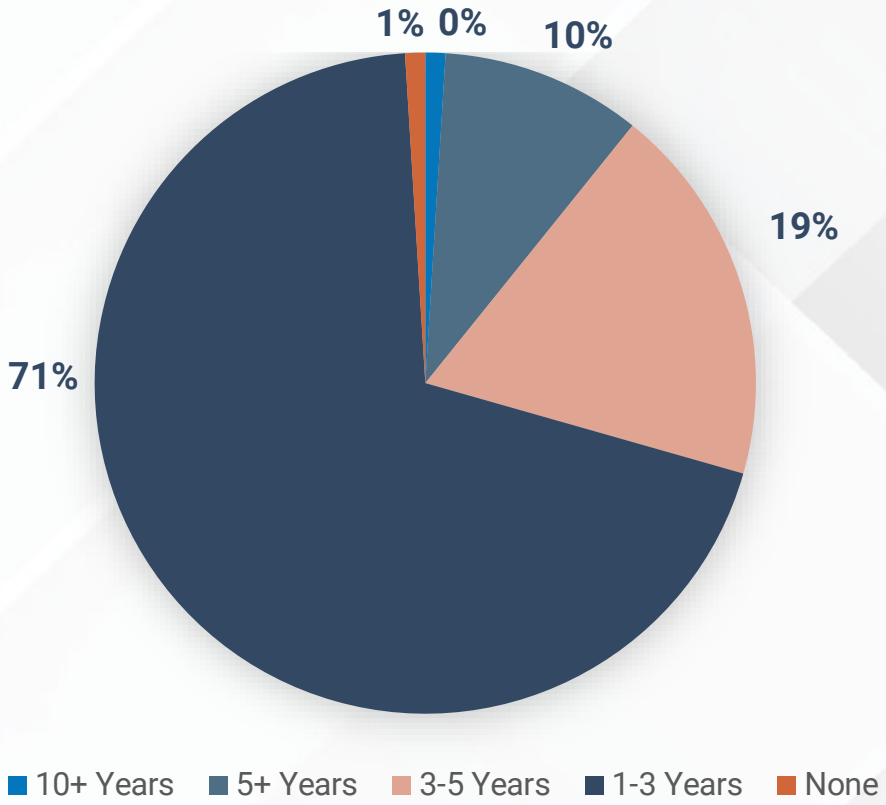
ONBOARDING GRADUATES WITH ON-THE-JOB EXPERIENCE

Notably, a year-on-year decline in the expertise of Creative Designers and Copywriters is evident, reflecting the impact of AI on creative industries and the shift in core skills required to perform duties.

HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

IN CRITICAL CONDITION: SCARCITY OF HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

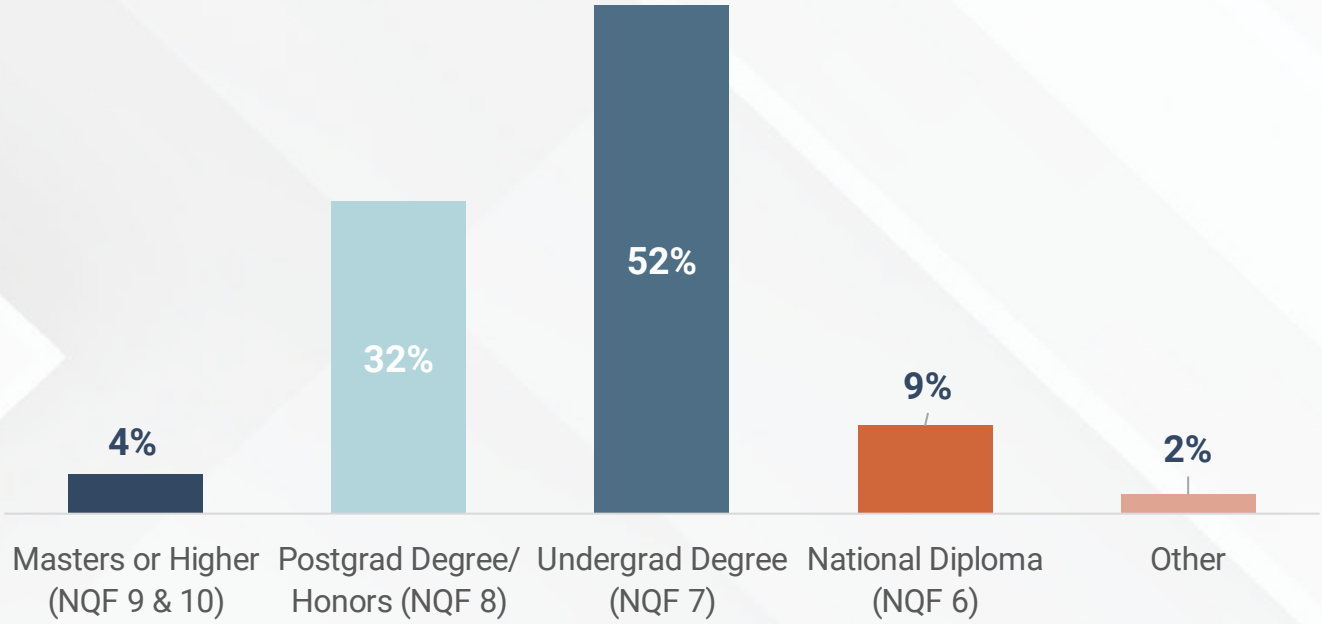
EXPERIENCE



OCCUPATIONS MOST IN DEMAND

- Registered Nurse
- Registered Nurse (Surgical)
- Emergency Care Professional
- Industrial Pharmacist
- Laboratory technologist/scientist

QUALIFICATIONS

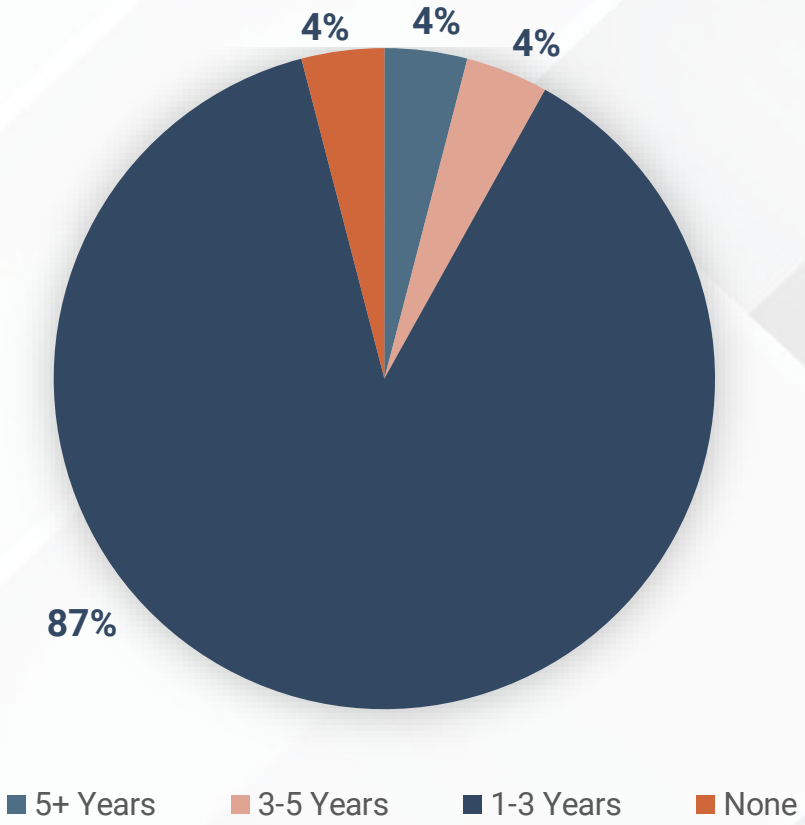


71% of employers require work experience between 1 to 3 years, while 29% need candidates with more than three years in the field.

STEM TEACHERS

WHO IS TEACHING TOMORROW'S INNOVATORS?

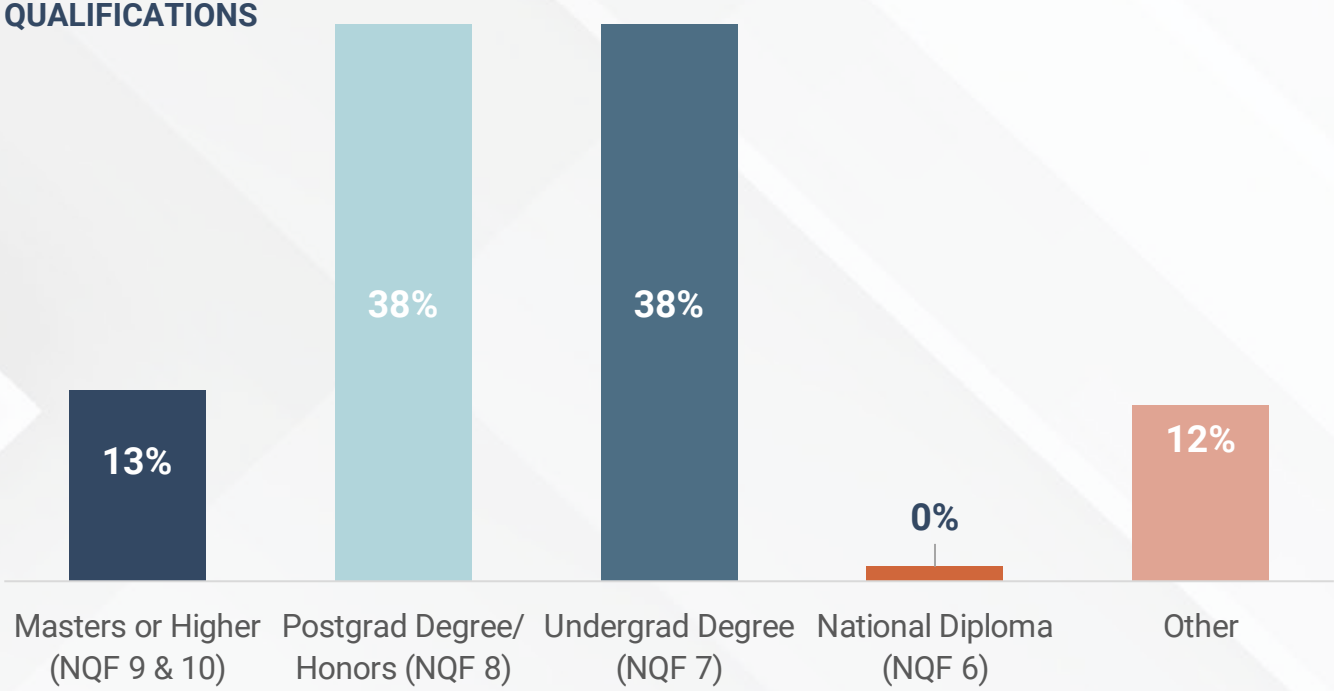
EXPERIENCE



OCCUPATIONS MOST IN DEMAND

- University Lecturer – Senior Lecturer and above
- FET Phase School Teacher (Grades 10–12) – only for STEM subjects
- Senior Phase School Teacher (Grades 8–9) – only for STEM subjects

QUALIFICATIONS



While 87% of companies are satisfied with 1 to 3 years' work experience in STEM fields, while 8% seek more seasoned professionals.

4 SNAPSHOT OF CRITICAL SKILLS

COMPARING THE SHIFTING TALENT LANDSCAPE

The comparison of South Africa's critical skills landscape since 2017 reveals a few consistent themes, most notably the continual and intensifying shortages in the areas of engineering, ICT professionals, and artisanal trades.

Engineering Shortage Hampers Infrastructure Development

According to the Engineering Council of South Africa, the country has only one engineer for every 3,166 people, far below global norms and insufficient for infrastructure growth. Engineering output remains below national targets, risking further delays in achieving key industrial and development goals unless decisive action is taken.

Growing ICT Skills Drain Amid Global Demand

South Africa's ICT professionals are increasingly drawn to markets like Australia, Canada, the UK, and the USA, where higher pay and stronger career prospects prevail. Meanwhile, rapid advances in AI, cloud computing, cybersecurity, and data science continue to accelerate digital transformation and widen the local skills gap.

Artisans: A Widening Gap in Technical and Vocational Skills

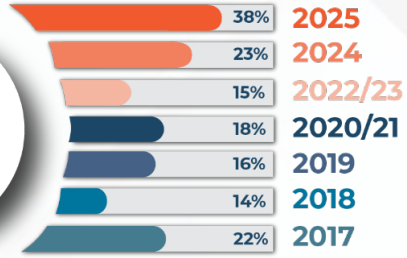
The National Development Plan (NDP) targets 30,000 qualified artisans annually by 2030, but output remains far short. An ageing workforce, emigration, and inexperience among new artisans are creating a 20-year skills gap, leaving South Africa without a strong pipeline of young, work-ready tradespeople.

4 SNAPSHOT OF CRITICAL SKILLS

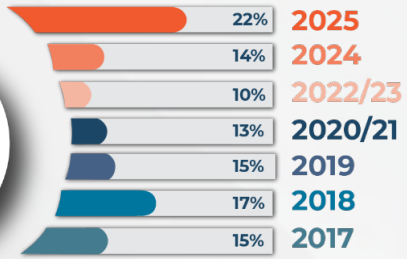
COMPARING THE SHIFTING TALENT LANDSCAPE

The graphs below present a comparison of the top categories that have experienced persistent skills shortages since the first survey in 2017.

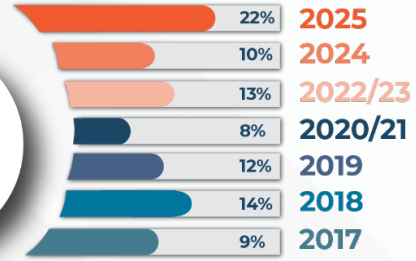
ENGINEERS



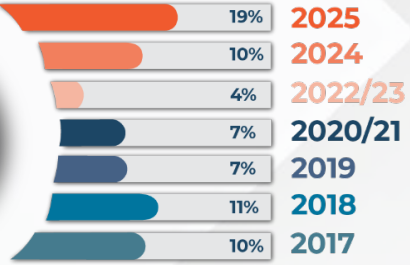
ICT



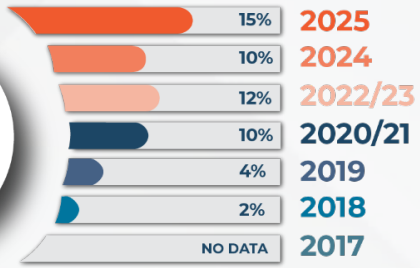
ARTISANS



SENIOR FINANCIAL EXECUTIVES



FOREIGN LANGUAGE SPEAKERS



4 SNAPSHOT OF CRITICAL SKILLS

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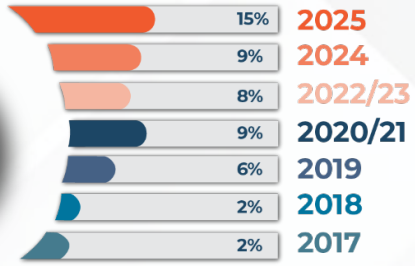
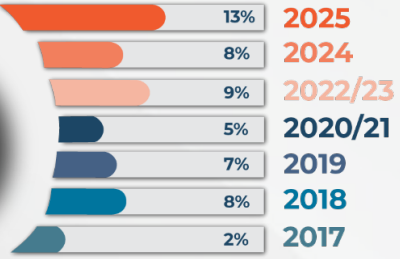
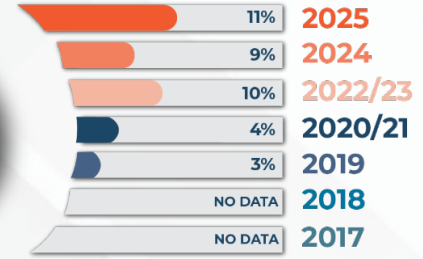
MEDIA & MARKETING



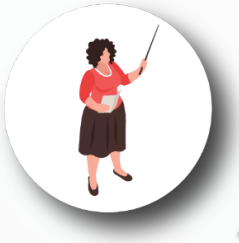
HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

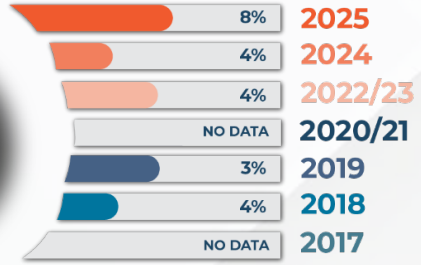


SCIENCE PROFESSIONALS

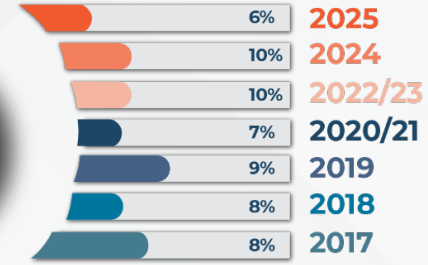


STEM TEACHERS





C-SUITE EXECUTIVES



5 IMMIGRATION CHALLENGES

KEY BARRIERS TO ATTRACTING GLOBAL TALENT TO SOUTH AFRICA

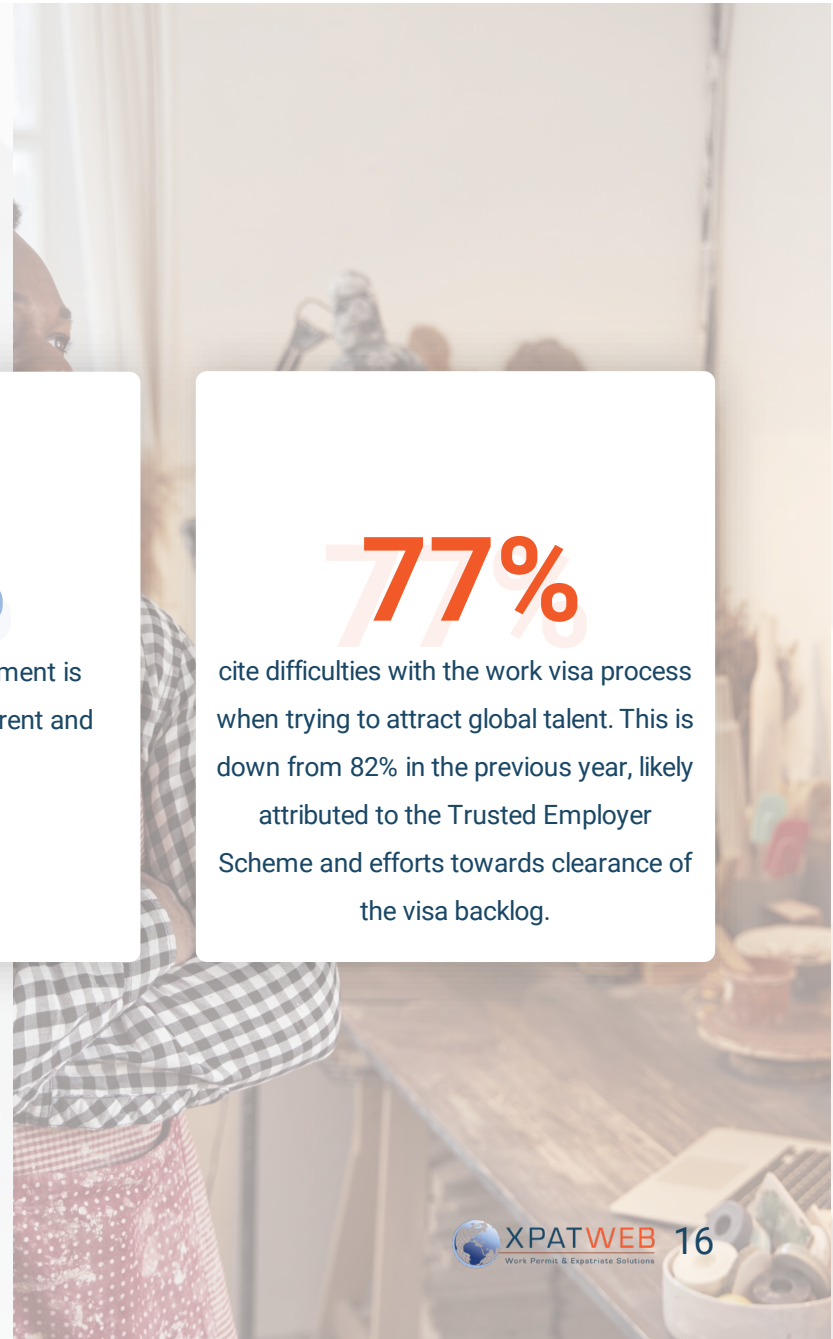
A significant **89% of survey participants** reported that unfilled critical skills vacancies are negatively affecting their business operations and stakeholders. From lost productivity to project delays and diminished innovation capacity, the effects are widespread.

ENCOURAGING TRENDS IN SOUTH AFRICA'S WORK VISA PROCESS

While challenges persist at South African embassies and VFS Centres, notable improvements have been seen in the work visa process. The TES and the partial waiver of SAQA evaluation requirements for foreign qualifications are streamlining applications.

In October 2024, the DHA announced that applicants awaiting SAQA results can receive a 12-month work visa, extendable to five years once evaluations yield a positive outcome within one year.

The share of companies citing difficulties in attracting foreign talent due to occupations excluded from the Critical Skills List dropped from **50% in 2024 to only 31% in 2025** – a significant improvement.



84%

indicate international recruitment is essential to meeting their current and future talent needs

77%

cite difficulties with the work visa process when trying to attract global talent. This is down from 82% in the previous year, likely attributed to the Trusted Employer Scheme and efforts towards clearance of the visa backlog.

2024 VS 2025 MOST ONEROUS FACTORS IN OBTAINING WORK VISAS FOR CRITICALLY SKILLED INDIVIDUALS

ADDITIONAL FACTORS CITED

VFS Facilitation Process
17%

Securing Submission Appointments
17%

New Points-Based System
14%

Visa Processing Times
56%

56% of respondents find visa processing times challenging, and 17% have difficulty in securing submission appointments, indicating the work visa process remains onerous and a barrier to attracting the critical skills the county needs.

THE SPOUSAL EMPLOYMENT HURDLE

A major barrier to attracting international talent is the limitation on work rights for spouses or partners of foreign professionals. In the 2025 survey, 100% of respondents said dual-career considerations are increasingly important to their organisations and it is clear skilled foreigners are hesitant to relocate where partners do not have direct access to work.

62% of participants have received enquiries from international employees in the past 2 years about the right of their partner to **work virtually** during their assignment.

96% of participants support direct work access for the spouses of Critical Skills Work Visa holders.

At what point are families of international employees most likely to ask you about the partners right to access work in the host country?

Before the move

68%

Once in host country

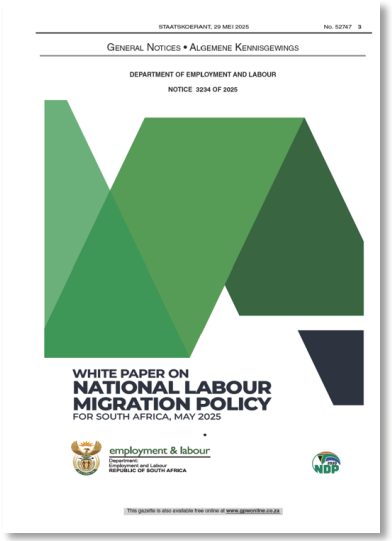
32%

68% of assignees enquire about partner work rights prior to relocation, indicating this is a key consideration in accepting an international posting

DIRECT ACCESS TO WORK FOR SPOUSES

Helen Frew, Executive Director at Permits Foundation, cautions that restricting spousal work rights could deter global talent from relocating to South Africa. The Foundation, which advocates internationally for direct work access for spouses, identified South Africa as one of several priority countries for reform in this regard.

The Department of Employment and Labour's on 29 May 2025 published the **White Paper on National Labour Migration Policy** similarly recognising automatic work authorisation for spouses as vital to retaining highly skilled migrants. It cited "*automatic issuance of work visa for spouses*" as a measure that could apply to Critical Skills Work Visa holders, those falling under the Occupations in High Demand Opened to Foreign Labour, and inter-company transferees.



5.3.3.12 **Retention of skills** in the country is a clearly identified national priority. Recent research points to the risk of attrition to emigration also affecting highly skilled foreign workers in South Africa (Segatti, 2014). International research (Carrera et al., 2014) shows that the **following factors play a decisive role in the retention of highly skilled migrants**:

- Access to contract of employment for permanent positions;
- Joint visa procedures for spouse and dependents;
- Automatic issuance of work visa for spouse;
- Right to study for spouse and dependents;
- Facilitated access to permanent residence after no longer than three years for the migrant worker and family.

Employers should therefore not be discouraged from granting permanent positions to highly skilled foreign workers. Visa dispositions cited above should accompany issuance of critical skills or any work visa whose holder falls under either the OHDOFL or the Critical Skills lists. The automatic issuance of work visas for spouses and dependants of such work visa holders should be considered. The same may be required in the case of spouses/dependants of inter-company transferees.

The potential positive impact of this policy for South Africa is evident from the Permits Foundations' latest global survey:

94% of global mobility professionals believe dependants should have immediate work rights;

91% say partner work authorisation enhances talent attraction;

88% of partner respondents held a bachelor's degree or higher; and

70% report that lack of such rights has either caused early returns from international commissions or deterred assignments.

6 TOWARDS SMARTER MIGRATION

TRUSTED EMPLOYER AND POINTS-BASED REFORMS ARE DELIVERING RESULTS

It is encouraging to see that recent policy innovations aimed at enhancing South Africa's skilled migration system are beginning to materialise. The TES offers faster, less onerous work visa applications for reputable organisations who need to attract critically skilled foreign talent, while the Points Based System brings predictability and transparency to the process.

80% of TES-participating respondents indicate the scheme has significantly improved their ability to secure work visas for foreign hires.

The implementation of the Trusted Employer Scheme follows a recommendation by Operation Vulindlela, made as part of a work visa review aimed at identifying inefficiencies in South Africa's visa application process.

SKILLS TRANSFER IS TOP OF MIND

90% of companies view skills transfer and succession planning as a business priority in terms of their expatriate professionals.

This is an important number as recruiting global talent alone cannot solve South Africa's long-term skills gap. Structured mentorship, project-based learning, and monitored handovers are essential to ensure local upskilling.

Proof of such programmes is also required for Trusted Employer status, where companies must demonstrate initiatives like Graduate Development or Bursary Schemes to develop local citizens and permanent residents.

POINTS-BASED SYSTEM'S PROMISING OUTCOMES

The PBS came into effect following the gazetting of the Third Amendment to the Immigration Regulations, 2014 by Minister of Home Affairs, Dr. Leon Schreiber. These regulatory reforms greatly benefit businesses by simplifying the visa process for hiring foreign nationals, especially in critical skills positions.

The system introduces greater clarity and measurables for visa applications, enabling businesses to plan more efficiently and prepare more effectively, and ultimately contribute to national development.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE PBS AMONG RESPONDENTS:

48% agree the PBS is effective and provides a more transparent predictable system

43% have not used the PBS yet

9% indicate they do not perceive any difference

It is also notable that the implementation of the PBS has influenced how companies approach Critical Skills Work Visa and General Work Visa applications:

53% report that they always use, or still prefer to apply for the Critical Skills Visa where applicants qualify

30% see no change in their approach

7% now prefer to apply for a General Work Visa

7 SHORTAGES REFLECT GLOBAL TRENDS

SOUTH AFRICA'S MOST SOUGHT-AFTER SKILLS MIRROR INTERNATIONAL PATTERNS

The 2025 survey results show that the top 10 hardest-to-fill roles remain unchanged from 2024, but shortages have intensified. Engineers, ICT specialists, artisans, and financial professionals continue to dominate the list.

Engineering roles, from maintenance and industrial engineers to mechanical engineering technicians and electrical engineering technologists, remain in high demand, while ICT positions such as data analysts and software engineers are increasingly difficult to fill. Among artisans, electricians, millwrights, and automation specialists top the list.

These shortages reflect global trends. According to the World Economic Forum's 2025 Future of Jobs Report, demand for AI, big data, cybersecurity, and digital literacy is surging across sectors, with over **90%** of employers in industries like automotive, telecoms, and healthcare expecting rapid technology adoption.

> Immigration is not static. It flows and moves in different ways. The building up of skills takes time.
>
> ***— Phindiwe Mbhele, Director of Corporate Accounts at DHA***

HOW WILL GLOBAL BUSINESSES RESPOND TO AI DEVELOPMENTS?

77% plan to reskill and upskill their existing workforce to work effectively alongside AI.

69% intend to hire new talent with skills to design and develop AI tools.

49% are re-orienting their organisations to pursue new business opportunities created by AI.

World Economic Forum's 2025 Future of Jobs Report

8 RECOMMENDATIONS

The movement of talent is no passing trend. It is a structural reality that will continue to shape how countries compete, innovate and grow.

TO DO THIS, SOUTH AFRICA SHOULD:

Streamline Talent Entry:

Any bureaucratic challenges in visa and work permit processes must be urgently addressed. Important reforms already introduced by the new Minister of Home Affairs have laid the foundation. Government should now build on the momentum created by the Trusted Employer Scheme, by scaling it for a broader and more lasting impact.

The ongoing digitisation at the Department of Home Affairs is welcomed as it can potentially reduce red tape and accelerate skilled talent entry into the country.

Align with Global Norms:

South Africa must align its policies with international best practices to stay competitive. For example, allowing spouses and accompanying partners of expatriate professionals direct work access would significantly increase South Africa's attractiveness in a tight global labour market.

Invest in Evidence-Based Policy:

A recent WEF article by BCG-affiliated experts notes that many countries lack transparency and visibility within their skills ecosystems. This hampers individuals, companies, and governments from making well-informed decisions.

South Africa must invest in strengthening Labour Market Intelligence through surveys such as this one. Accurate, timely, and detailed data should inform policymaking to identify priority areas, track progress, and enable more agile responses to skills demands.

Promote the Country as a Talent Destination:

Besides policy reform, South Africa must market itself as an opportunity-rich, innovation-friendly economy open to global talent. The international race for skills is also a race of perception.

Establish a Global Mobility Network:

With 84% of respondents saying an international search would ease workforce challenges, it is clear immigration policy should assist businesses to attract and retain skilled foreign talent. Globally mobile professionals' first impression of a new country often begins with the visa application and immigration process, setting the tone for how welcomed and supported they feel. Expert immigration support can significantly help shape this overall employee experience. Further to this, a strong Employee Value Proposition (EVP) can be the difference between drawing top talent or losing it.

In a competitive global market, proactive immigration policy is not simply good governance. It is a business imperative for growth and long-term success.

South Africa needs robust, real-time data on skills supply and demand. This intelligence will inform education planning, immigration reforms, and funding allocations, enabling a proactive rather than reactive approach.

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