



XPATWEB

Work Permit & Expatriate Solutions



Critical Skills Survey Report 2024



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CRITICAL SKILLS SURVEY 2024



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Introduction

This 5th edition of the largest survey of critical skills contains verified employer feedback on the skills most critically in demand in South Africa.

The survey is widely used in the market to inform HR strategy and also used by Business Unity South Africa (BUSA) and National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) for policy decisions.

In collaboration with the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the Department of Home Affairs (DHA), the Survey contributes to shaping the Critical Skills List which plays a vital role for South African employers. Marisa Jacobs, Managing Director of Xpatweb serves on the Nedlac committee, representing businesses in conjunction with various stakeholders. This partnership underscores the significance of the Survey and its impact on South Africa's immigration landscape.

The Survey presents latest data on the **critical skills most in demand** according to large corporates and multinational employers in South Africa.

Background of the Critical Skills Work Visa

The Critical Skills Work Visa in South Africa was introduced to address the country's demand for skilled professionals in key sectors. To combat skills shortages affecting economic growth and competitiveness, the government implemented an immigration policy to attract talent globally.

The Critical Skills Work Visa was a significant part of South Africa's immigration strategy, designed to support national goals like the National Development Plan (NDP), Industrial Policy Action Plan (IPAP), and New Growth Path (NGP). This visa category was created after changes to immigration laws, leading to a more focused approach to resolving critical skills shortages in the local job market.

The Critical Skills Work Visa evolved by combining the Exceptional Skills Visa and the Quota Work Visa, which focused on crucial skills categories outlined in the 2009 Quota List. While the previous visas effectively tackled skills shortages, the consolidation aimed to simplify procedures and cater to South Africa's changing requirements.

The amendments to immigration legislation led to the introduction of the Critical Skills Work Visa. Taking effect on 3 June 2014.

The Critical Skills Work Visa implemented a dynamic strategy utilizing a detailed Critical Skills List that encompassed sought-after and rare occupations, demonstrating a deep understanding of the evolving labour landscape.

The Critical Skills Work Visa is designed to advance key national initiatives, including the National Infrastructure Plan, Strategic Integrated Projects, and Key National Strategic Projects in line with the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition's objectives. Through the recruitment of skilled individuals in crucial areas like engineering, healthcare, IT, finance, and education, the visa contributes to strengthening critical infrastructure, fostering innovation, and improving South Africa's global competitiveness.

Through collaborative efforts with stakeholders, including government agencies, industry professionals, and business leaders, the Critical Skills Work Visa was meticulously crafted and implemented. This involved the identification of priority sectors and occupations experiencing skills shortages. It also involved the establishment of rigorous eligibility criteria for visa applicants, as well as the streamlining of application processes to efficiently attract top-tier talent.

The Critical Skills Work Visa epitomises South Africa's commitment to leveraging immigration as a strategic enabler of economic development, talent attraction, and global competitiveness. By targeting skilled professionals with in-demand expertise, the country endeavours to address skills shortages, foster innovation, and pave the way for a more prosperous future for all its citizens.



The Journey and Progress Update of the Critical Skills List



This adaptive approach underscores South Africa's commitment to leveraging global talent for a resilient economy.

In the early 2000s, South Africa initiated discussions about the Critical Skills List to address skills shortages. The Immigration Act of 2002 laid the groundwork for identifying and attracting skilled foreign professionals. By 2014, the DHA published the first official Critical Skills List, which remained unchanged until 2020.

From 2016 and onwards, economic challenges (slow growth, high unemployment, and political changes) prompted discussions about the Critical Skills List. Comprehensive reviews in 2018 and 2019 aligned the list with broader economic strategies, including the National Development Plan (NDP).

Operation Vulindlela, a joint initiative of the Presidency and National Treasury, launched in 2020, aimed to accelerate economic reforms – this included improving the immigration system.

Published in February 2022, the updated Critical Skills List, reflects current and future economic needs. According to Operation Vulindlela's Progress Update Q3/Q4 2023 Report, the updated list successfully attracted skilled individuals, with 10,041 Critical Skills Visas issued in 2022 (a 13% increase over 2021).

Most visas went to science, engineering, and technology professionals, aligning with top-demand occupations in the 2023/24 Survey Report.

Going forward, the Critical Skills List in South Africa will continue to play a crucial role in shaping the country's economic growth and development by identifying occupations vital to its progress. Recently, there have been updates to this list, reflecting changes in demand and policy. In April 2024, the Minister of Home Affairs announced that the list will now be adjusted more dynamically, responding to immediate needs rather than annually. For instance, in October 2023, the following two occupations were added to the list being, Veterinarian and Veterinarian Nurse

Top 10 Skills in Demand

The survey indicates that among the most in demand skills that businesses are struggling to recruit include **Engineering (23%), ICT (14%); Artisans, Foreign Language Speakers and C-Suite Executives (each at 10%).**



**The total number of responses include multiple areas of skills shortages selected by single participants.*

Occupations & Industry Highlights

In our latest Critical Skills Survey Report, we explore essential metrics like National Qualifications Framework (NQF) levels and professional experience. These critical professions play a pivotal role in innovation, communication, and artisanry across sectors, driving global progress and prosperity. We aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics driving these fields forward as they relate to the new criteria for a Critical Skills Work Visa. Dive into our 2023/24 Survey Report for insights on trends, challenges, and opportunities within South Africa's unique context.

Engineering



According to the Survey, engineering remains the number one most in-demand skill since our 2019 Critical Skills Survey Report.

Engineering is crucial for progress and growth across various fields in South Africa. According to the Survey, **engineering remains the number one most in-demand skill**. Engineers have retained the top ranking spot in the survey since 2019. Our data reveals trends in recruitment preferences across specialties, including chemical, mechanical, mining, and industrial engineering. Looking at the country's engineering landscape, we see both the ongoing need for these skills and the challenges in meeting that need.

The Engineering field demand since 2017, according to the Critical Skill Survey:



Recruitment Challenges

Recruiting engineering skills in South Africa remains challenging, with 23% of businesses reporting difficulty - a **5% increase from our 2020/21 Survey Report**. This highlights the ongoing scarcity of skilled engineering professionals in the labour market.

The Engineering Council of South Africa's 2022/2023 report emphasizes greater involvement of engineering professionals in infrastructure projects. Their participation not only provides leadership and catalyses investment but also accelerates upskilling for young professionals.

Despite local talent development, demand outpaces supply, leading to international recruitment. South African companies primarily source engineers from Africa, the UK, and Europe due to specialized expertise in those regions.

6 To mitigate the shortage of engineers, targeted interventions are essential.

As of October 3, 2023, amendments to Critical Skills list broaden eligibility criteria. This move aims to attract skilled engineers to South Africa by allowing those with “candidate registration status” within professional organizations to contribute their expertise under supervision. This shows Regulations adapting to the restraints of professional body endorsement.








Information & Communication Technology (ICT)

“

The 2022 JCSE-IITPSA ICT Skills Survey revealed that growing numbers of South African employers were recruiting ICT skills overseas and more local practitioners were looking to work for companies abroad. To us, this could signal a widening IT skills gap.’ – Admire Gwanzura, 2022/23 IITPSA Report

In our digital world, the demand for ICT skills has surged globally. These skills span software development, cybersecurity, data analysis, network management, and IT project management.

Below are the **top 5 most sought-after skills** areas within this sector, according to the Survey:

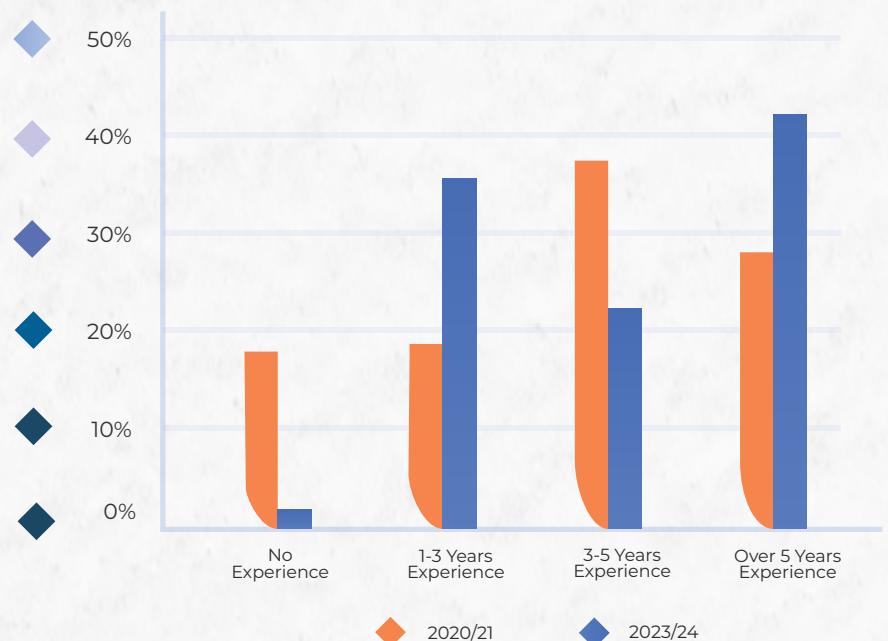
-  Software Developer
-  Data Analyst
-  Data Scientist
-  Specialist Information Technology Management
-  IT Engineer

The challenge faced in retaining skilled individuals within the technological sector.

According to a report titled **‘Africa’s Tech Skills Scarcity Revealed’** by System’s Application and Product (SAP), issued in March 2023, South Africa is grappling with the challenge of retaining skilled tech workers. This presents an opportunity to engage the youth in skills development, which would enhance sustainability within the ICT industry, in turn creating revenue streams to address youth unemployment.

Experience

In comparison to our 2020/21 Survey Report, the demand for experience has significantly risen. The percentage of professionals with 1-3 years’ experience increased from 17% to 35%, while those with over 5 years’ experience grew from 28% to 44%.



6 Interestingly, the demand for talent with no industry-specific experience has dropped from 17% to 0.

In South Africa, the demand for ICT skills is fuelled by factors like artificial intelligence, digital transformation, e-commerce, cloud computing, and cybersecurity. However, the sector struggles with retaining skilled professionals who often seek opportunities abroad or in more lucrative markets.

In South Africa's ICT sector, a gap exists between theoretical knowledge gained in universities and practical experience needed for roles. Graduates often feel uncertain about their future, leading some to explore other industries with smoother education-to-employment transitions. Survey data reinforces this trend, as employers now seek 1-3 years' experience from ICT professionals.

Furthermore, the 2022/23 JCSE-IITPSA ICT Skills Survey Report (released in October 2023) found that the average South African ICT professionals perform multiple task sets, with only a few considering their roles to be specialist.

One of the ways to address the challenge faced by the ICT industry is through Public-Private Partnerships. Collaboration between the government, educational institutions, and the private sector aims to create training programs and internships that provide practical experience and bridge the skills gap.



By continuing to invest in education, training, and inclusive digital skills development programs, South Africa can address the **demand for ICT professionals**, as well as ensure that graduates are well prepared for the demands of the ICT workforce.

Media and Marketing

In South Africa, media and marketing specialists are vital for boosting brand awareness, engagement, and business growth across diverse industries. Although not explicitly on South Africa's Critical Skills List, the sought-after skills and competencies of these specialists remain in high demand in the job market.

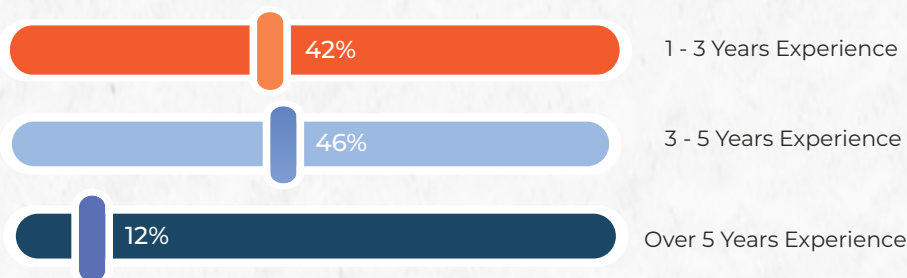
Businesses are prioritizing their digital presence, increasing the demand for skilled digital marketers globally. South Africa faces a scarcity of proficient talent in the marketing and media sectors. According to the survey results over the past 8 years, Marketing and Media Specialists are consistently among the top ten sought-after professionals in South Africa. Sales and marketing professionals, designers, copywriters, media specialists, and marketing managers are highly sought after.

Career Junction's 2024/Q1 employment insights highlighted shortages in skills felt within the marketing, design, media, and arts sectors. The DHA Critical Skills List includes digital occupations like multimedia designer and market research analyst. The Digital School of Marketing notes a critical shortage of professionals with digital skills, leading companies to intensify recruitment efforts and focus on upskilling existing employees.

The current DHA Critical Skills List include digital occupations such as:

-  Multimedia Designer
-  Market Research Analyst
-  Multimedia Specialist

The Digital School of Marketing highlights a shortage of professionals with digital skills. Marketing executives are ramping up recruitment and prioritizing upskilling their current workforce in response.



Our Critical Skills Survey reveals that 42% of respondents seek candidates with 1-3 years of experience in marketing and media roles. Companies are now emphasizing candidates with higher qualifications compared to those with minimal or no qualifications, as compared to our 2021 survey.

The evolving South African business environment highlights the increasing significance of media and marketing professionals in the face of digital trends, shifting consumer behaviours, and global market changes. To stay competitive, businesses must focus on developing talent, promoting digital literacy, and adopting innovative marketing strategies for today's digitally savvy consumers.

Artisan

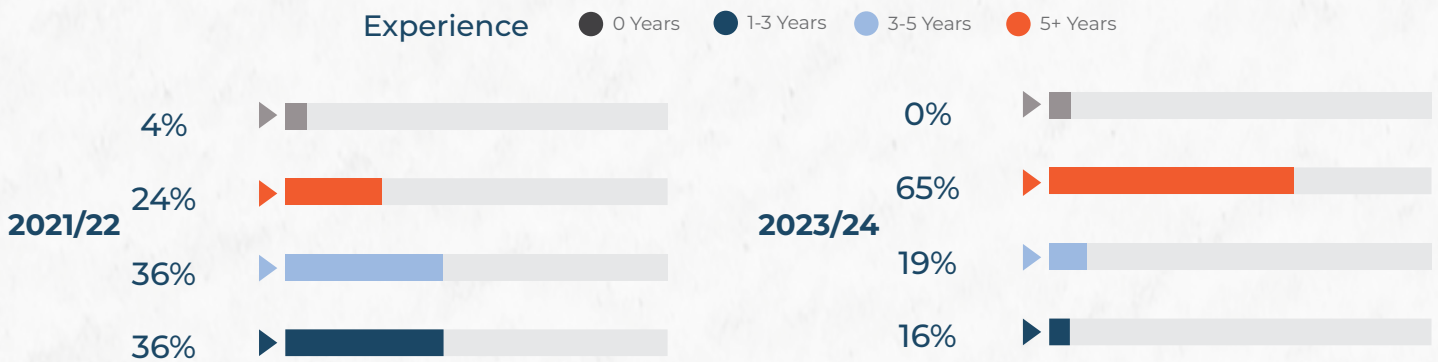
An Overview of South Africa's Artisan Skills Shortage

Artisan skills are vital in South Africa for development and key industries. The shortage of qualified artisans is a persistent issue due to factors like an aging workforce, skills gaps, and inadequate investment in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs.

As highlighted by Bizcommunity, **'A fully functional economy requires a robust supply of Artisans across critical sectors like energy, water, transport, and logistics.'** In November 2022, the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology Dr Blade Nzimande emphasised the need for at least 60% of graduates to pursue training in a trade, to meet the country's demand for scarce skills.

Our 2023/24 Survey Report provides detailed insights into the challenges faced by employers when recruiting artisans in South Africa. The comparative data from 2020/21 to 2023/24 shows the growing scarcity of qualified artisans - a trend that has visibly intensified over the years.

Employers find it challenging to recruit artisans with 3–5 years of experience, as highlighted by 65% of them. This is a significant increase from 2021, where only 24% of employers prioritized this experience category compared to those with 5+ years or 1–3 years.



The Shortage of Skilled Artisans

There is a skills gap in the South African labour market between available skills and those desired by employers. Engaging foreign experts for practical training can help bridge this gap.

Artisan skills that employers reported as difficult to recruit in the current labour market include:

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

Although the current sectoral context shows reduced expansionary demand due to vacancies, capital investments and growth since 2020, per the MerSetor - Sector Plan 2024/25 indicate potential for future development in both higher-level and trade-specific skills.

Initiatives to Promote Artisan Skills Development

The merSETA Final Sector Skills Plan 2024/25 indicates efforts to address critical skills shortages. In the 2022/23 fiscal year, merSETA supported about 22,000 unemployed learners, resulting in around 4,000 artisans and certifying over 3,000 learners.

Welcoming skilled international artisans can boost under-resourced sectors and national development. Leveraging the Critical Skills Visa program is key to attracting foreign talent and enhancing artisan practices.

South Africa's Healthcare Crisis

A Shortage of Medical Professionals and a Talent Exodus

South Africa's healthcare system faces a crisis due to a shortage of skilled medical professionals. **Migration of health workers seeking better opportunities abroad** worsens the situation, depleting local healthcare resources and impacting medical services nationally.

Indiran Govender's (Associate Professor at Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University) 2024 study highlights this crisis: 'South Africa's health sector is being crippled because it is haemorrhaging medical professionals at an alarming rate, which drastically affects the quality of healthcare provided.' Skilled health workers are being drawn abroad by better job prospects, improved working conditions, and political stability, destabilizing the nation's health outcomes. More than 23 400 South African health professionals are working overseas, significantly impacting the country's ability to manage public health effectively.

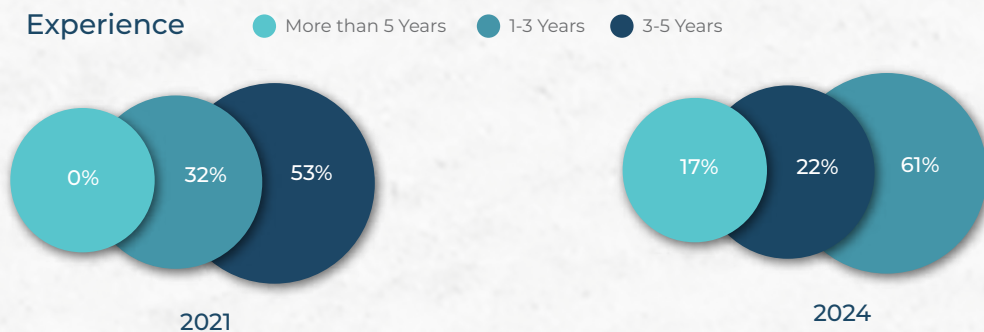
Professional occupations that are most in demand for the healthcare sector include:

-  Laboratory Technologists/Scientists
-  Registered Nurses
-  Emergency-Care Professionals
-  Medical Doctors
-  Industrial Pharmacists

To tackle this crisis, South Africa must improve working conditions, address administrative inefficiencies, enhance compensation, and offer incentives for healthcare professionals to work in rural & underserved areas.

To address healthcare challenges, the South African government added twenty-two crucial medical roles to the 2022 Critical Skills List.

According to the Department of Health (DOH), South Africa has a vacancy rate of 18.6% for specialist medical professionals and 13.7% for nurses. Despite this, the Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (DENOSA) has raised concerns about the shortage of nurses in public health facilities, with 20,000 nurses unemployed.



Between 2021 and 2024, South Africa's healthcare sector witnessed a notable shift towards a less experienced workforce with those having **1 – 3 years of experience growing by 91%**.

The NHI Bill, signed into law on 15 May 2024, is a key topic of debate regarding its impact on the medical brain drain in South Africa.

A South African Medical Association (SAMA) survey of 17,000 doctors indicates that **38% plan to leave due to the NHI**. The departure of these skilled professionals would significantly affect healthcare service delivery and hinder the NHI.

Tailored strategies are essential to address South Africa's medical brain drain crisis, ensuring equitable access to quality healthcare and addressing scarce skills in the sector.

C-Suite Executives

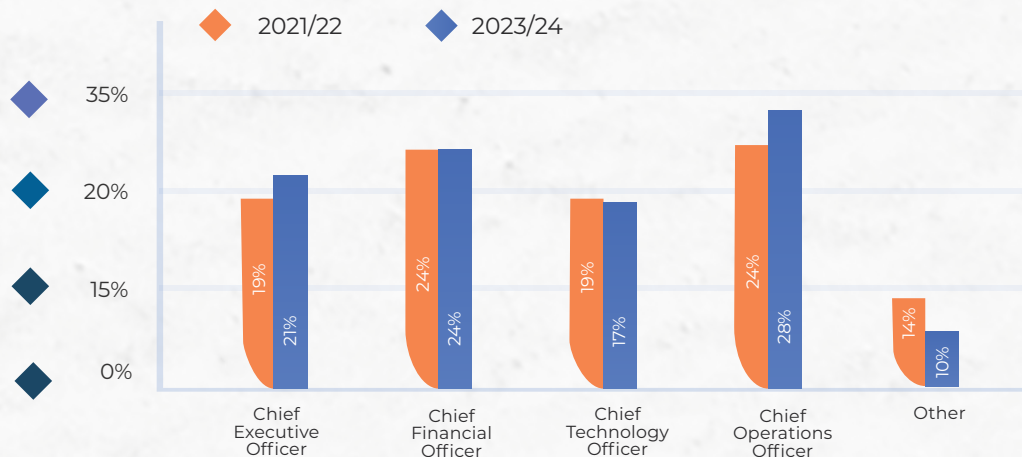


The Chief Operating Officer (COO) was noted as being in high demand in our Critical Skills Surveys from both 2021 & 2024.

South Africa is experiencing a notable shift in demand for C-Suite executives due to changing business landscapes. The State IT Agency (SITA), led by CEO Dr Bongani Mabaso, highlights the challenges in filling these positions.

The 2023/24 Survey Report shows a growing demand for COOs, making up 28% of the demand compared to 24% in 2021.

Comparison of the demand for C-suite positions between 2021/22 & 2023/24 Surveys



As they are essential for navigating the complexities of modern business environments, top-level executives are not only expected to have extensive experience, but also advanced education and critical thinking skills.

Education levels of C-Suite Executives

The SITA case study reveals recruitment challenges typical across sectors. Dr Mabaso noted difficulties in filling C-suite roles in his ITWeb interview at GovTech 2023, despite multiple interview rounds.

The demand for highly educated C-suite executives in South Africa has risen, with a 6% increase in master's degree holders between 2021 and 2024.

Qualifications - Masters or Higher (NQF Level 9 - 10)

42% **2021/22**

48% **2023/24**

Top executives face a challenging business environment ahead, necessitating high-level skills for effective risk and team management and resilience in economic downturns. Companies are innovating to address the scarcity of C-suite skills, with GenZ stepping into these roles in notable South African companies like Moti Group. Moti Group's approach blends experienced leaders' wisdom with young professionals' fresh perspectives through mentorship. Emphasizing advanced education and critical thinking, this strategic investment in executive development aligns with global talent strategies. It ensures South Africa's competitiveness and economic growth by leveraging diverse talent across industries.




Increased demand for advanced education and critical thinking among top leaders aligns with global talent strategies. Ongoing investment in executive skill development will help South Africa stay competitive, leveraging global talent for economic growth and success across industries.

Foreign Language

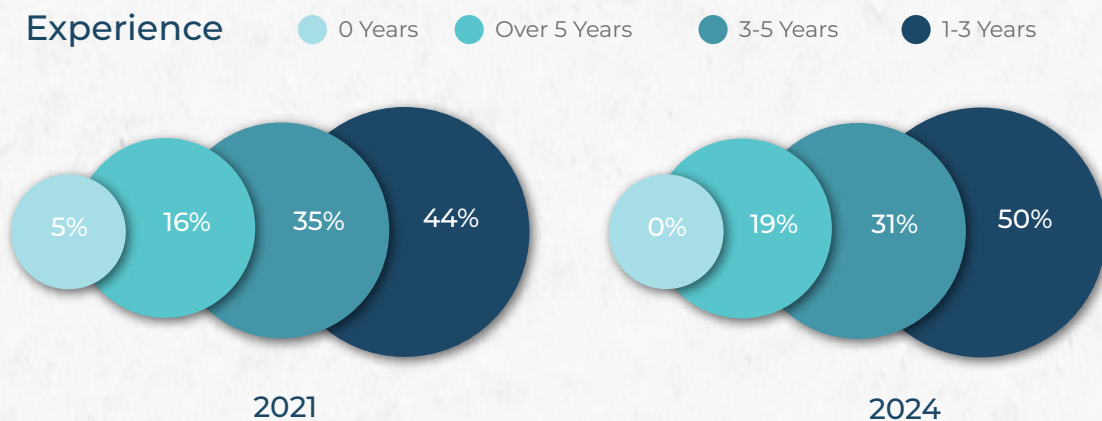
The Vital Need for Foreign Language Proficiency in South Africa's Workforce

In the competitive job market, bilingual or multilingual skills are increasingly vital. Employers value language abilities for roles involving international travel, client management, and global operations. Companies prefer direct communication with international clients, making language skills valuable.

In South Africa, industries benefit from foreign language speakers for international engagement, diverse customers, and operational needs. Key industries include:

-  Tourism and Hospitality
-  Business and Trade
-  Education

Recent statistics from our 2023/24 Survey highlight a shifting paradigm in the proficiency levels of foreign-language speakers, revealing crucial trends that are reshaping the workforce from 2021 to 2024.



This data indicates a trend towards foreign language speakers having more experience over the years, with a significant reduction in those with no experience and a notable increase in those with 1-3 years of experience.

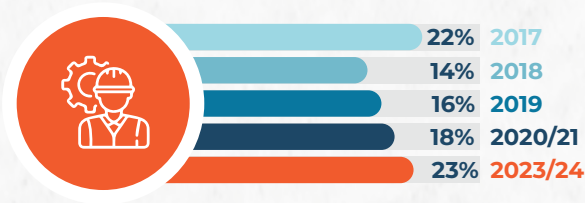
In a globalized world, multilingual professionals are essential for companies eyeing international markets. Enhancing language proficiency through education and training programs is crucial.

Foreign-language speakers were not initially on the 2022 draft Critical Skills List but were later included, underscoring their strategic importance in key sectors and aiding South Africa's economy and competitiveness.

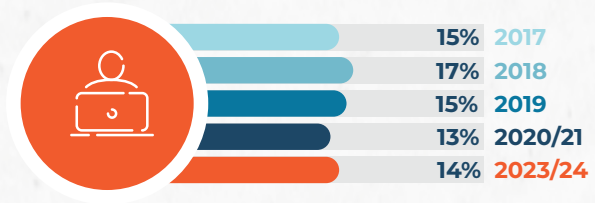
2017 - 2024 Skills Shortage Comparison

Over the past 8 years, the skills shortage has persisted with eight categories of skills dominating the top of the list of professionals that businesses find difficult to recruit, leading to many seeking suitably qualified and experienced candidates beyond South Africa's borders to fill these posts. Herewith a comparison of the top eight changes to skills shortages in these categories over the past.

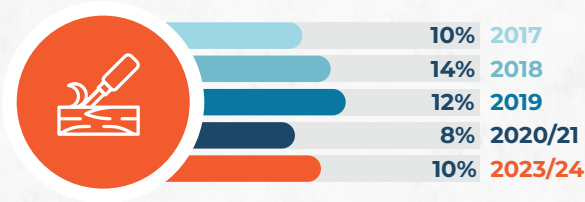
ENGINEERS



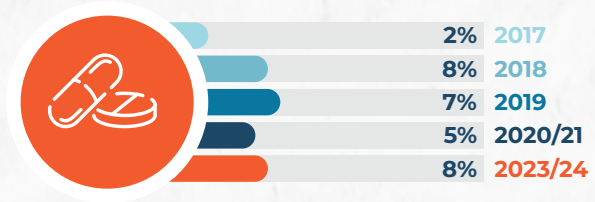
ICT



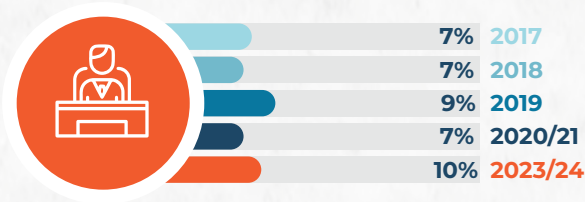
ARTISANS



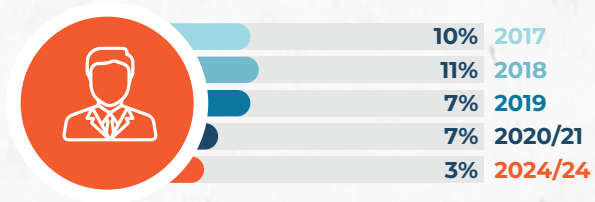
HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS



C-SUITE EXECUTIVES



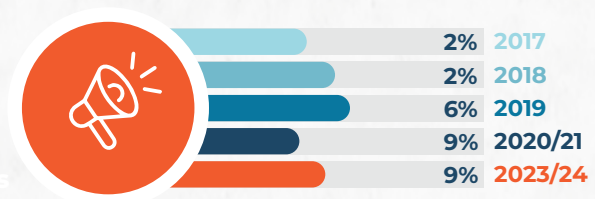
SENIOR FINANCIAL EXECUTIVES



FOREIGN LANGUAGE SPEAKERS



MEDIA AND MARKETING



Trusted Employers Scheme

Enhancing South Africa's Competitive Edge with The Trusted Employer Scheme

The Trusted Employer Scheme (TES) streamlines skilled worker immigration, reducing administrative burdens for employers and facilitating quicker access to foreign talent. This initiative is part of the DHA's efforts to address critical skills shortages in South Africa by efficiently mobilizing skilled workers.

Since its inception, seventy-three employers have joined TES, demonstrating government support for businesses in accessing needed talent swiftly.

Employers across sectors appreciate the Scheme's efficiency but call for broader inclusion, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) lacking resources in traditional visa processes.

Points-based system selection criteria for Trusted Employers.



TES operates on a points-based system, where employers need to score a minimum of eighty out of one hundred points to qualify. Here is a brief breakdown of how points are awarded:

Key Benefits:

Efficiency:

The Trusted Employer Scheme aims to simplify and streamline the immigration process, reducing the bureaucratic hurdles that have hampered employers in the past.

Reduced Documentation:

With a focus on trust and reliability, the scheme will require less extensive documentation from participating companies, making the process smoother and more efficient.

Accelerated Processing Time:

Companies approved under the Trusted Employer Scheme will experience significantly faster and more predictable processing times for immigration-related matters, reducing delays and enhancing operational efficiency.

Employment for Spouses of Critical Skills Work Visa Holders in South Africa



84% of respondents acknowledged the ongoing & escalating significance of dual career and partner issues within their organisations.

Xpatweb's annual Survey Report highlights the country's skills crisis, with 96% of respondents advocating for spouses/partners of Critical Skills Visa holders to work upon recognition of their dependent status in host countries.

96%

YES

Marisa Jacobs, Xpatweb's Managing Director and NEDLAC Business Representative for Immigration, asserts that spouses/partners of highly skilled international employees bring valuable knowledge and expertise to the South African workforce.

Our continued recommendation for legislation remains in line with the purport of the Permits Foundation in their pursuit for the Promotion of Dual Careers, which, in effect, authorises direct work access, incident to dependent status, for spouses/partners of the holders of Critical Skills Work Visas or Intra-Company Transfer Work Visas. This enabling legislation will no doubt enhance the ability of business to attract skills," says Jacobs.

The Institute for Security Studies warns that denying work rights to spouses of Critical Skills Visa holders in South Africa widens the skills gap and stalls their careers, with permanent residence applications taking up to five years.

74% of respondents note that family members often inquire about their right to work in the host country before relocating, emphasizing its significance for foreign talent considering roles in South Africa.

A 2018 study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) demonstrates that immigrant workers could boost South Africa's GDP per capita by 5%, emphasizing the economic importance of addressing employment rights for partners.



The 2023/24 Critical Skills Survey Results have spurred crucial changes, with this year's survey poised to have an even bigger impact.

Points-Based System

Introduction of South Africa's Points-Based System

The DHA is modernizing the immigration process to attract global talent by introducing a points-based system on **20 May 2024**.

The General Work Visa category is set to benefit from the points-based system, incorporating criteria like age, qualifications, language skills, work experience, and a job offer.

The revised regulations have omitted the 'ability to adapt.' This is a positive change, as a points-based system is designed to enhance clarity, predictability, and objective criteria.

Australia, the UK, Germany, and Canada utilize points-based immigration systems, streamlining applications and attracting skilled professionals to boost the economy, support business growth, and acquire necessary skills.

The points-based system is particularly useful, as it allows qualified individuals to work in South Africa for a limited period with predictable and clear visa criteria.






Overall, the introduction of the points-based system represents **a significant step forward in enhancing South Africa's competitive edge in the global talent market**, aligning with international best practices and addressing local skills gaps.

Remote Work Visa

South Africa taps into the global trend of remote working by introducing Remote Work Visas to attract digital nomads and remote workers. This initiative positions the country as a prime destination for professionals who are not tied to a physical office and accessing new opportunities for flexible work arrangements

It is essential to understand that Remote Work Visas complement rather than replace short and long-term visitor visas, offering individuals the opportunity to work for foreign employers while enjoying a high quality of life in South Africa.

The framework for Remote Work Visas includes a few components, such as:

-  **Eligibility Criteria** ● Applicants must provide proof of employment with a foreign company outside South Africa. They should also have a stable income of no less than R1-million per annum to support themselves during their stay.
-  **Visa Duration** ● Remote workers on this visa may apply to be exempt from South African income tax, provided they do not stay beyond 6 months. If they intend to stay longer in a 12-month period, they will be expected to register with the South African Revenue Service.
-  **Tax Implications:** ● The Remote Work Visa is issued for a period of up to 36 months, with the possibility of renewal.

This visa category also benefits spouses of work visa holders who would like to continue working for their international employers while their spouse is on assignment in South Africa.

Developing and implementing this visa will continue to involve collaborating with stakeholders, assessing best practices from other countries, and ensuring that the necessary infrastructure and services are in place. This initiative is poised to bring significant benefits to both the local economy and the global remote workforce.

Identifying Immigration Challenges



of organisations find it difficult to recruit critically skilled individuals.



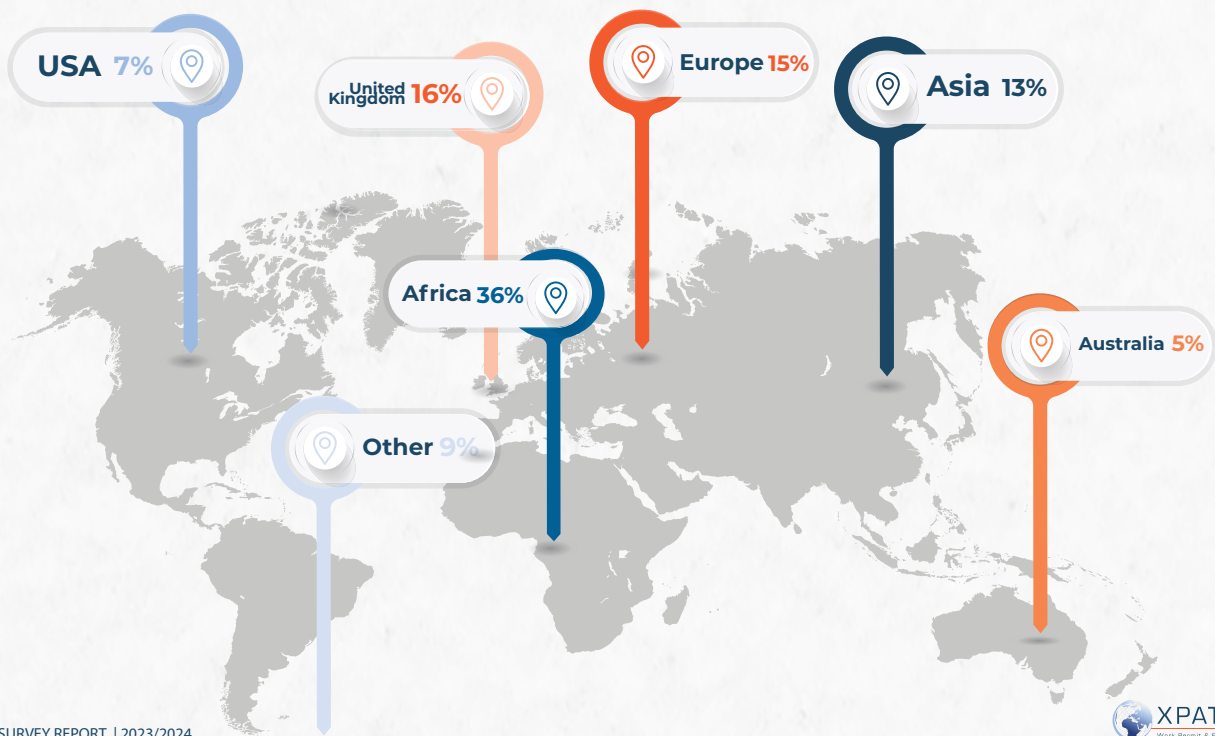
of participants indicated that the spouses or partners of critical skills work visa holders should be authorised to work in the host country, once recognised as dependents.



of participants perceive the work visa process as a prohibitor to recruit internationally.

Recruiting of Foreign Nationals

An overview of the country(ies) business typically recruit/employ skilled individuals from:



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