

Perceptions of an Apprenticeship Selection Process

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Abstract

Organisations have identified artisans as a critical staffing concern. The artisan job family has been identified as a scarce and critical skill. Domestic economies and the effectiveness and success of several industries could be negatively affected if this artisanal crisis is not addressed. Despite this, there is limited research regarding the profiling and selection of apprentices.

The qualitative research reported in this paper aimed to explore three stakeholders' perceptions and experiences of an apprenticeship selection process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected representatives from the employer, apprentice, and applicant stakeholder groupings to gauge their views on the selection process.

A sample of seven employer representatives, 12 apprentices and six applicants from two companies were individually interviewed to collect data. The narrative analysis findings revealed that the selection process was more manageable, professional, fair, and transparent than previous selection techniques.

The employer representatives also highlighted that the process had efficiently enabled them to screen for the unique skill set required of commencing apprentices. Despite the positive impact of the selection process experienced by all three stakeholder groups, some challenges were documented. The paper concludes with recommendations to address the research findings and managerial implications.

1. Introduction

Apprenticeships are a form of workplace or on-the-job training that imparts general skills (Markowitsch & Wittig, 2022). Once the apprentice has completed the requirements of a formal or informal trade internship and has passed the requisite trade test, the apprentice is known as an artisan (Solomon & Mathias, 2020). A range of practices are encompassed in this type of learning. However, an artisan typically works in the following categories: millwright, electrician, plumber, boilermaker, carpenter, mechanic, fitter and turner, pattern maker or injection moulder (Markowitsch & Wittig, 2022). Regardless of form, an apprenticeship is defined as “a job that includes structured on-the-job training combined with a share of related technical off-the-job training to learn a skilled occupation that is certified and recognised by the industry upon completion” (Fazio et al., 2016, p. 2).

Several benefits can be realised through the apprenticeship training model. Many stakeholders – from the government to employers, the youth, and the currently employed – are interested in pursuing these benefits (Fazio et al., 2016). Apprenticeship programmes impart the skills and techniques required by workers to adapt and develop new technologies. Through this training format, human capital is more aligned with the operational needs to increase competitiveness and productivity (Fazio et al., 2016; Kramer et al., 2015). Apprenticeship programmes have been documented as an effective model for increasing productivity levels (Hasanah et al., 2023; NAS, 2017) and improving innovation levels (Cedefop, 2016; Fazio et al., 2016).

The programmes are highly successful in facilitating the transition of new labour market entrants (Cedefop, 2016; Hasanah et al., 2023; Fazio et al., 2016), reducing the mismatch between employers and employees (Cedefop, 2016; Fazio et al., 2016; Fortwengel et al., 2021; Kramer et al., 2015) as well as providing a stable career ladder and a positive employability pathway for the youth (Fazio et al., 2016). A sixth benefit is lower dismissal costs as the programme is used as a selection screening device leading to more extended tenure periods (Lene & Cart, 2018; Solomon & Mathias, 2020). A related seventh benefit is lower hiring costs, as employing former apprentices mitigates the need for job interviews and negates advertising and agency fees (Jacoby & Lerman, 2019; Muehleman et al., 2010).

The key focus area of this study is the Eastern Cape automotive sector. This sector is a significant employer and driver of economic development with a long and stable history in South Africa (SA) (Mvoko, 2019). The sector contributed 4.3% to the national gross domestic product in 2021. In the same year, the export of vehicles and automotive components equated to a record amount of R207.5 billion – 12.5% of the country’s total exports. This local sector has grown organically over the past few decades and is geographically located in three of the nine provinces (Moothilal, 2017). The national automotive supply chain consists of seven original-equipment manufacturers (OEMs) and Tier 1 components

suppliers, large multinational companies supplying subassemblies to the OEMs. The smaller Tier 2 and Tier 3 components suppliers provide goods to the Tier 1 suppliers (Obermeyer, 2022). The Eastern Cape automotive sector comprises about 120 enterprises with differing manufacturing capabilities. These include four OEMs, 59% Tier 1 suppliers, 24% Tier 2 suppliers and 10% Tier 3 suppliers (Mvoko, 2019).

1.1. Problem Statement

The artisan job family has been identified as a priority area of concern regarding recruitment and selection in SA (Government Gazette, 2018; Pandor, 2018). Demand outweighs supply leading to the necessity for this talent. Five of the top 10 pivotal occupations within the manufacturing sector are automotive-related apprenticeships, with automotive motor mechanics rated as the occupation most in demand (Mzabalazo Advisory Services, 2022). Organisations need help to attract, select and retain adequately skilled individuals to fill vacant technical positions. Furthermore, it is highlighted that this challenge is expected to worsen (ManpowerGroup, 2023; MerSETA, 2019).

In reviewing the literature, several issues become clear. While much has been written about the demand and supply for apprenticeships and artisans (Fazio et al., 2016; Kramer et al., 2015; Lene & Cart, 2018; Markowitsch & Wittig, 2022; Muehleemann et al., 2010; Mzabalazo Advisory Services, 2022), research is deficient in numerous areas or approaches. Apprenticeship research, in general, is often marginalised and overshadowed by the emphasis given to general academic education and preparing students for higher education (Chankseliani et al., 2017). The lack of research that adopts an epistemological approach is of relevance and interest to this study, allowing participants to share their perceptions and experiences of this developmental journey with their own words and voices. Much of the data collected when researching apprenticeships and artisans is obtained via surveys, questionnaires and meta-analyses. Little examines the issue from a more profound and broader perspective. One recent large national study (Mzabalazo Advisory Services, 2022) interviewed 13 stakeholders covering a broad spectrum of organisations. Amongst others, this included governmental agencies, employers, trade unions, public and private providers of artisans, etc. However, the voice of the apprentice and artisan was not included.

There is also a noticeable need for more work investigating the role of staffing practices in studying apprenticeship and artisans. There is literature and discussion that highlights various pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship learning models from proponents such as Cannan (2013) as well as Karmel and Oliver (2011). Comparisons between national approaches to training apprentices were made by Cedefop (2018); Chankseliani et al. (2017); Markowitsch and Wittig (2022), and discussions on the transition of apprentices from school to work were advanced by Achatz et al. (2022) and Flynn et al. (2016). However, there needs to be more which addresses the recruitment and selection of apprentices. While

the debate is complex, why is staffing an ignored element in the artisan problem? Staffing practices' significant role in organisational success and survival has been widely documented in Greer et al. (2016); Kim and Ployhart (2018) and Lievens et al. (2021). However, contrary to national and industry needs, academics and decision-makers often disregard the value of staffing (Chakraborty & Biswas, 2020; Thoman & Lloyd, 2018). There needs to be more literature about the role of staffing practices in apprenticeship recruitment and development (Forsblom et al., 2016; Imdorf & Leemann, 2012; Puchert et al., 2017a, 2017b). This was confirmed in a systematic literature review on apprentice selection that found only 12 empirical articles written on the subject between 1990 to 2020 (Puchert et al., 2021).

This paper aims to highlight the noteworthy impact of both these issues, namely, the phenomenological voice of applicants and apprentices and the effects of staffing on the success of apprenticeship programmes and the supply of artisans. This paper, therefore, provides additional insights in answer to the question posed in the International Journal on Training and Development: 'How do we solve a problem like apprenticeship?' (Newton et al., 2019).

1.2. Research objectives

The main objective of the research was to explore the perceptions of an apprenticeship selection process from the lens of the employer, the apprentice, and the applicant.

To achieve this objective, this paper is structured as follows: a literature review; an account of the empirical research undertaken; and the presentation and discussion of the research findings against the literature. The paper concludes with practical managerial implications and recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The apprenticeship life cycle

An apprentice undertakes and completes four stages during their apprenticeship, known as the apprenticeship life cycle model, to become an artisan. Successful apprenticeship programmes should efficiently implement the four stages depicted in Figure 1.

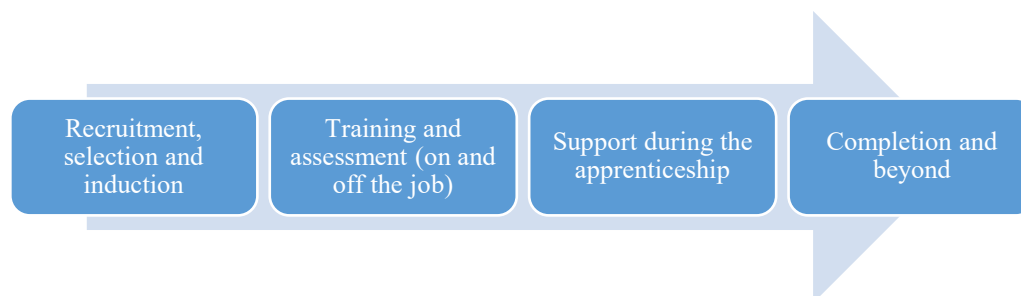


Figure 1. The apprenticeship life cycle

Source: Adapted from Smith and Kemmis (2013)

In the first stage, practices are implemented to attract potential applicants and screen them for their match with the training enterprise. The induction process then aims to assist in retaining these apprentices within the organisation. In the second stage, apprentices commence with the training and assessment of the programme. The specific context of the apprenticeship determines the ratio of on-the-job to off-the-job training and the degree of centralisation of this training. Various forms of assessment are employed, from log books to final examinations, which can culminate in recognised qualifications. The third stage aims to support the apprentice, increasing the likelihood of the apprentice completing the programme. Support sources include a tutor, master or even case managers. The final stage focuses on the future of the apprentice post the programme. An apprentice may continue with the training organisation and become a full-time employee as an artisan, or they can pursue other training opportunities to build on their apprenticeship qualification (Smith & Kemmis, 2013). Three challenges to implementing apprenticeship programmes are offered in the following sub-sections. Whilst there are various challenges to apprenticeship implementation, these are elaborated on as they pertain to the first life cycle stage – the focus area of this article.

2.2. The attractiveness of apprenticeships

Apprenticeship programmes can be an efficient means of human capital development. However, to optimise this efficiency, they must be perceived as valuable and attractive to the youth and employers (Chankseliani et al., 2017; Hasanah et al., 2023; Fazio et al., 2016). The local Department of Higher Education and Training proclaimed 2014-2024 the “Decade of the Artisan”. The campaign’s theme, “It’s cool to be a 21st Century Artisan”, aimed to promote the career choice of artisanship to the country’s youth. This has become necessary as SA needs 30,000 qualified artisans annually by 2030 but only produces, on average, 20 000 skilled artisans annually. During the 2020/21 financial year, a 36.5% decline in enrolments in apprenticeship programmes was noted compared to the previous financial year. Synergy, strategy and mutually beneficial action plans between the main stakeholders are needed if the dream behind the “Decade of the Artisan” campaign is going to be achieved (Lushaba, 2023; SAnews.gov.za, 2022). Employers seeking to employ apprentices need applicants of good quality. However, does the high-achiever youth in the country see apprenticeship as an attractive option? The benefits of apprenticeship programmes must be attractive to potential apprentices, and stigmatisation must be avoided (Mummenthey et al., 2012; 2023; Zelloth, 2013).

The apprenticeship must be deemed a valued or modern choice for many young people (Deissingner, 2019). The youth prefer university to vocational qualifications (Fazio et al., 2016; Pandor, 2018; Smith & Foley, 2019). The higher status linked to academic school pathways and university pathways post-school and the low status of apprenticeships may be associated with the low status awarded vocational

education and training (VET) in general (Cedefop, 2017). Despite studies confirming that VET is not an easier option than formal schooling, this perception remains. The cognitive demand of mathematics and science within the vocational stream is more demanding than in the academic stream (Houston et al., 2010; Jacoby & Lerman, 2019). Nevertheless, apprenticeships have low status, are associated with manual labour, and are only an option for working-class people (Altreiter, 2021). Therefore, the artisan career path has been recommended to be professionalised (Evans-Klock, 2012; Pandor, 2018; Solomon & Mathias, 2020). This aspect is elucidated in the sub-section that follows.

2.3. The apprentice selection challenge

Employers require a unique blend of technical and human relations skills. Employability skills, such as communication, adaptability, creative thinking, ability to solve problems independently, leadership, motivation, group effectiveness and influencing skills, are also regarded as key (Brunello & Wruuck, 2021; Carter, 2017; Maisiri & Van Dyk, 2021). Managing oneself at work is also an essential employability skill (Brewer, 2013; Jacoby & Lerman, 2019).

Core skills sought in an apprenticeship applicant have traditionally been algebra, geometry, mechanical comprehension, spatial visualisation, technical reading, and interpersonal relations (Jacoby & Lerman, 2019; Martin, 2016; Torpey, 2013). However, a broader interdisciplinary approach is required. Verbal and numerical literacy, planning, and communication abilities are vital. Managerial and leadership skills are also considered essential, specifically the ability to work effectively in teams. Furthermore, various information technology skills are becoming increasingly necessary within the field. Competence in agile decision-making and accountability, the ability to quickly adjust to change and act, collaboration, problem identification, analysis and solution have also increasingly been expected from artisans (Kazancoglu & Ozkan-Ozen, 2018; Laberge et al., 2016). Artisans need to comprehend the complex interaction between software, electronics and mechanical components within the automobile industry. They require transitional skills, such as coding skills, data analytics, human-machine interaction and an understanding of information technology (Kochan et al., 2018; Maisiri & Van Dyk, 2021).

However, global and local technical graduates need more generic employability skills (Mbatha et al., 2014; Rasul et al., 2013; Tshela & Agumba, 2014). Whilst apprentices tend to master the technical skills during their training, they lack the core employability skills required by the industry (Husain et al., 2010; Rasul et al., 2013). Specifically, there needs to be more basic personal and professional skills such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving to enhance their employability (Kramer et al., 2015). Deficiencies in apprentices' holistic problem-solving and thinking skills have also been established. This is particularly disturbing as these skills assist in transitioning these students from school/college to the workplace (Hauschildt, 2016; merSETA, 2016). It has, therefore, been recommended that

apprenticeship programmes have a balanced approach, integrating employability and technical skills into the curriculum (Jacoby & Lerman, 2019; Mustapha & Greenan, 2002).

Other researchers have recommended incorporating work readiness or core work skills workshops into the training to enhance the school-workplace transition (Brewer, 2013; Shankar et al., 2016; Solomon & Mathias, 2020). The provision of support to applicants applying for new positions has also been highlighted (Azar et al., 2013; Fox, 2018). Applicant preparation workshops should assist potential applicants in ensuring they follow the advertisement instructions, help them enhance their profile outlined in the resumé, and prepare for the assessments and tests likely to be conducted in the selection process (Puchert et al., 2022). Having outlined the skill requirements of apprentices, the following subsection discusses the selection methods and techniques employed to source these skill sets in the applicants.

2.4. The nature of the apprenticeship selection process

Selecting apprentices is more complex than screening other employees. The applicants mostly have the same qualifications and are inexperienced (Deissinger, 2019). Improved screening and selection techniques for apprentices are required to assist in their retention and reduce drop-out rates (Lovender, 2015; Smith & Kemmis, 2013).

Scholastic achievement is prioritised in selecting apprentices (ABCMA, 2018; Forsblom et al., 2016; Imdorf & Leemann, 2012; Lodovici et al., 2013). A strong foundation in literacy and numeracy skills is necessary (Brewer, 2013). Secondary education type (incorporating subject choice) has been established as informative in revealing general and technical aptitudes and the employability of applicants. Education type can, therefore, be used as a cost-effective preliminary screening technique, reducing the applicant pool before using costlier psychometric tests (Puchert et al., 2017a, 2017b). Whilst making employment decisions using scholastic achievement may be cheaper, a shortcut may be regarded as erroneous in the apprenticeship training context. Unlike ordinary employment contracts, apprenticeship contracts are difficult to terminate and wages are fixed for a defined period. A poor selection decision could mean a significant loss for the enterprise (Jacoby & Lerman, 2019; Mueller & Wolter, 2014). Furthermore, where consistent standards and examinations are lacking in the education system, the comparability of applicants using this method is difficult (Langner, 2015; Mueller & Wolter, 2014).

Care should be exercised in identifying apprentice applicants with low interest and aptitude for VET, as they may prematurely terminate their apprenticeship training. Adequate standards and selection procedures must be implemented (Mummmenthey & du Preez, 2010). Recruiters are finding the solution

to be the use of assessments (Grosvenor, 2016; NAS, 2017). Whilst not the most preferred method, applicants perceive general mental ability (GMA) tests favourably as they are deemed more relevant to job performance than other selection measures such as application blanks, personality and integrity tests (Sackett et al., 2023; Siegenthaler, 2011). Applicants also perceive the selection process as being more stringent when GMA tests are included, increasing their perception of the attractiveness and status of the position applied for (Anderson et al., 2010).

Rigorous practices in recruiting and selecting apprentices are encouraged (Goastellec & Ruiz, 2015; Imdorf, 2017; Lovender, 2015). Intense processes result in the correct individuals being identified upfront (Rowe et al., 2017). In pursuit of a fair selection process, a four-phase selection process was recommended by global researchers. It comprised an application form review, aptitude testing, face-to-face interviews, and a short internship in the training organisation (Imdorf & Leemann, 2012). Applicants who meet the hurdle requirements are then ranked, with the highest-scoring applicants being chosen first (Torpey, 2013). Another multiple-stage apprentice selection was employed locally. The selection process also had four phases: application review, rating of application documentation, aptitude testing and skills-based teamwork assessment, and interviews. The constructs assessed at each stage significantly affected the apprentice applicants' selection success (Puchert et al., 2022). This selection process was employed by companies A and B in this study.

Should applicants have a negative experience during a selection process, this can have a negative impact on the organisation's brand and reputation (Schmitt, 2014; Trindale, 2015). A significant relationship exists between applicants' reactions to employers' selection procedures and their attraction to the organisation (Ryan & Ployhart, 2000). Enhancing applicants' experiences of a screening process is, therefore, a core goal of most employers. The level of confusion and uncertainty experienced by applicants can be minimised, thereby creating a more positive experience. This ensures that the screening process is transparent and improves the access and quality of information communicated to applicants (Trindale, 2015). With little information about the organisation, applicants use the selection procedure characteristics as indicators of the characteristics of the employing organisation (Lievens et al., 2002). In light of this, novel screening and tracking techniques have been proposed for apprenticeship selection practices (Amdouni & Ben Abdesslem Karaa, 2010; Perinot, 2016). Besides helping refine the matching process between positions and applicants, these tools assist unsuccessful applicants in having a positive impression of the selection process. The tracking and feedback mechanisms enable all applicants undergoing the selection process to experience it as fair, transparent and cutting-edge. This is important for the branding and image of the employing organisations (Anderson et al., 2010; Schmitt, 2014; Trindale, 2015). It also boosts the applicants' confidence even if unsuccessful (Wildschut et al., 2012). The perceptions of beginning apprentices on the factors influencing their decisions to enter and commit to an apprenticeship highlighted that the process of

belonging to a workplace was an essential contributor to apprenticeship continuation (Chan, 2016). The heterogeneity of apprenticeship applicants also necessitates that recruitment and selection efforts to attract more and higher quality apprentices must consider the applicants' backgrounds, characteristics, and aspirations in their plans and activities in order to be successful in these endeavours (Smith, 2023).

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Approach

This research adopted an inductive, qualitative approach. The study was underpinned by interpretivism to understand the perceptions the participants attributed to the experienced phenomenon (Collis & Hussey, 2021). The researcher employed exploratory qualitative research to understand three stakeholder groupings' experiences of a multi-stage apprentice selection process at two automotive plants. The selection process included four phases, namely, application review, rating of the application documentation, aptitude testing, skills-based teamwork assessment and interviews.

3.2. Research Population and Sample

The study population consisted of three stakeholder groups at two Eastern Cape automotive plants, companies A and B. Company A is an OEM, and Company B is a Tier 1 components supplier to Company A. A letter of invitation was sent to the Human Resources (HR) Director in Company A and the Chief Executive Officer in Company B, detailing the purpose of the study. The three stakeholder groups were named employer representatives, apprentices and applicants. The researcher applied non-probability purposive sampling for the employer-representative group to select the participants. Line, training and HR managers were chosen as the most suitable participants because they are part of the apprentice selection process at these two companies. Four employer representatives from Company A and three from Company B were selected. The apprentice group had been successful in the apprenticeship selection process, whilst the applicant group had not. The Training Managers at the two companies provided the researcher with spreadsheets of individuals processed through recent apprenticeship selection processes. A random convenience sampling procedure identified the 12 individuals in the apprentice group and the six in the applicant group. The latter six individuals came from Company A, employed as automotive operators and, therefore, available to participate in the study. Company B could not produce individuals for this group as they had no internal applicants for the apprenticeship programme and could not contact any unsuccessful applicants at the time of the study.

3.3. Research Method

The research was performed by conducting semi-structured interviews with the selected participants. An interview guide, comprising two sections, was developed. Section A dealt with demographic details, including age, race and gender, and Section B covered participants' perceptions of the apprenticeship

selection process. The interviews were conducted within three months of the selection process. Before recording the conversations using a tape recorder, permission from the participants was obtained. The interviews ranged between one hour and one hour 30 minutes to allow the participants sufficient opportunity to respond appropriately to the interview questions. The interviews were organised, recorded and transcribed as recommended by Bryman, Bell and Hirschsohn (2021).

3.4. Data Analysis

The study implemented a narrative analysis technique employing the three levels of meaning-making documented by McCormack (2000). This data analysis technique comprises three levels that assist in deducing meaning from a large dataset (Toolis & Hammack, 2015). The first level creates a cameo of each interview transcript, whilst a more extended narrative version from each participant is still available. In the second level of analysis, a comparison is made between each participant's narrative. In the final analysis level, the researcher elaborates the narratives using quotations and explanations provided by the participants (McCormack, 2000).

The researcher acquired ethical clearance from the university (REC- 270710-028-RA) and written permission from the two organisations involved in the apprentice selection process to conduct the research at the automotive plants. All participants provided informed consent before participating in the study. Transcriptions of the interviews were password protected on the computer used, locked and stored away in a secure cupboard in line with the ethical codes of conduct of the University of Fort Hare.

Validity and trustworthiness were maintained throughout the study to ensure the quality and integrity of the obtained qualitative data by implementing various strategies. A solid theoretical foundation formed the basis for the design of the interview guide (Bryman et al., 2021). This interview guide was also evaluated by a panel of subject matter and qualitative research experts who improved the questions asked of the participants (Brace, 2018). The transcriptions and the identified themes were returned to the participants to confirm their accuracy and highlight any contradicting information. The participants made the necessary changes. The final strategy used was a co-coder to cross-check the codes to ensure reliability (Roulston & Choi, 2018).

4. Results and Findings

The demographic information of the participants is provided in Table 1. Most of the sample were males, with only two females in the employer's representative group, four in the apprentice group and two in the applicant group. In terms of age, all the apprentices were 18 years old during the selection process. In contrast, the applicant group were six to ten years older. The employer's representative group was of mixed racial composition. The apprentice and applicant groups were predominantly (72%) Black

African, with Coloureds accounting for the minority of the sample. Slightly above half (58%) of the apprentices were selected for the Automotive Electrician apprenticeship.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

Group	Company	Participant Number	Position	Age	Gender	Race
Employer representatives (ER)	A	1	Tech training manager	47	Male	White
		2	HR manager	54	Male	White
		3	Tech training coordinator	36	Female	Black African
		4	Technical trainer	33	Male	Coloured
	B	5	Training manager	34	Female	Indian
		6	Production manager	53	Male	Black African
		7	Technical trainer	41	Male	Coloured
Apprentices (AP)	A	1	Automotive Electrician	18	Male	White
		2	Millwright	18	Female	Black African
		3	Millwright	18	Male	Black African
		4	Automotive Electrician	18	Male	Coloured
		5	Automotive Electrician	18	Female	Black African
		6	Automotive Electrician	18	Male	White
	B	7	Millwright	18	Male	White
		8	Automotive Electrician	18	Female	Black African
		9	Millwright	18	Male	Black African
		10	Automotive Electrician	18	Male	Black African
		11	Millwright	18	Male	Coloured
		12	Automotive Electrician	18	Female	Black African
Applicants (AL)	A	1	Automotive Electrician	28	Female	Black African
		2	Millwright	28	Male	Black African
		3	Automotive Electrician	24	Male	Black African
		4	Automotive Electrician	27	Male	Black African
		5	Automotive Electrician	26	Female	Black African
		6	Millwright	29	Male	Black African

Source: Own compilation

This section presents the perceptions of the three stakeholder groups regarding their experience of an apprenticeship selection process. The findings are tabulated in Table 2 according to the four identified major themes, as well as the identifying groups and the sub-themes per major theme.

Table 2: Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Identifying Group	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Appropriateness of the selection process	All three stakeholder groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employer representatives Apprentices Applicants 	Pertinent and manageable
		Fair and transparent
		Suitable and appropriate
Theme 2: Efficiency of the selection process	One stakeholder group: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employer representatives 	Helped shortlist the required attributes and skills

Theme 3: Impact of the selection process	All three stakeholder groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employer representatives • Apprentices • Applicants 	Perceived positively
Theme 4: Challenges within the selection process	Two stakeholder groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apprentices • Applicants 	Cost
		Mathematics

Source: Own compilation

In the second level of data analysis, keywords from the narratives were coded and counted. Through the identification of the consistent usage of words, four main themes emerged. These themes, with their associated sub-themes, are examined in more detail in the following paragraphs. Only the most appropriate direct verbatim quotes are provided to support the findings. The first theme pertained to the suitability of the selection process.

Theme 1: Appropriateness of the selection process

The three stakeholder groups agreed that the selection process was more pertinent and manageable than previous processes experienced. A participant from the employer’s representative group effectively summarised this aspect in the following statement:

We have struggled in the past to work through the huge number of applications we received. It seemed overwhelming. This process put it in bite-size chunks and made it much more manageable (ER4).

The empirical literature has consistently recommended that comprehensive and demanding selection processes are needed to identify the best candidates for an apprenticeship (Fortwengel et al., 2021; Goastellec & Ruiz, 2015; Imdorf, 2017; Jacoby & Lerman, 2019; Lovender 2015). The selection process experienced in this study was deemed appropriate in meeting the rigorous requirements needed to successfully screen apprenticeship applicant pools. This is necessary in order to improve the throughput rate of apprenticeship programmes as well as prevent the unnecessary costs associated with failed appointments (Cedefop, 2018; Jacoby & Lerman, 2019).

The apprentice and applicant groups found the selection process fair and transparent. The fairness theme centered on the fact that these stakeholders believed all applicants were allowed to prove themselves in this process. Applicants’ perceptions and experiences of selection processes are widely documented as critical for the effective onboarding of these applicants as well as the reputation and branding of the employer (Anderson et al., 2010; Schmitt, 2014; Trindale, 2015; Wildschut et al., 2012). Both these aspects were lauded by the apprentice and applicant groups within this study. They highlighted this point in the following ways:

I thought the process was great. I know I made it but that's not the point. It was fair in that it was about your knowledge and skills. Not about other stuff like who you know in the company and other really bad stuff that I hear about that goes on in other companies (AP3).

I have applied a few times before – here and at other companies. But I didn't get in. I thought this process was much better. Not because I got in but because it felt like more professional. Like each step had a meaning (AP9).

The process was fair. I am kinda shy. I don't normally do well in interviews. I also struggled in the teamwork assessment. But I must have done ok in that cos I go through to the interview. But, that didn't go well so I didn't make it all the way through. I need to work on that for next year (AL2).

It felt developmental. I went through to the third stage. I know I fell short on the maths and the teamwork parts. I can work on that. I will apply again next year (AL3).

The link between applicant reactions to employed selection processes and their attraction and subsequent engagement with the employer has been well-researched. The benefits thereof to the employer are also well established. In this study, this was confirmed as all three stakeholder groups affirmed the suitability and appropriateness of this selection process. The employer representative group also found the process highly efficient, which is discussed in the following sub-section.

Theme 2: Efficiency of the selection process

Employer representatives in both companies consistently agreed that this selection process met their needs in providing a shortlist of applicants with the basic skills required by a commencing apprentice. Three employer representatives had the following to say:

We need our artisans to have good problem-solving skills. This selection process has helped us get those that can do this. Then we just need to teach them the technical skills. We can't teach them to be good problem-solvers, good team players, good communicators as well. There's just not enough time in the apprenticeship programme (ER1).

We really need our appies to have a unique skills set. Technical and soft skills. This selection process has helped us get closer to that (ER3).

We used to just look at their CVs and do interviews to check their technical knowledge and stuff. We didn't always get it right though because they were just a mouth full of teeth when they became

artisans. We got so many complaints from the shopfloor. About how the artisans couldn't explain the problem on the line and how they were gonna fix the stuff. But with this process we do feel we have gotten better at this. The right people with the right skills are getting through (ER5).

The literature has reliably explained the need for a wide range of employability skills beyond those of a technical nature (Kazancoglu & Ozkan-Ozen, 2018; Kochan et al. 2018; Laberge et al., 2016; Maisiri & Van Dyk, 2021). The selection process commented on in this study helped the two employing companies obtain the attributes and skills they needed in their apprentice applicants. This would assist them in training these applicants into effective artisans for their companies. This selection process, therefore, would also assist the companies to avoid other negative consequences. Applicants who do not have the required interest and/or aptitude for a particular trade should not be considered as research has indicated the high likelihood of their premature termination from the programme (Mummenthey & du Preez, 2010). This too can have a negative impact on the reputation of the employer and result in increased costs to the company. The next theme speaks to a different perception that the stakeholder groups had of the process.

Theme 3: Impact of the selection process

In this study, all three stakeholder groups agreed that the selection process positively impacted how the apprenticeship programme was perceived. Some appreciative comments from participants serve as an illustration of this finding:

What I like about this process is that the applicants were made to feel like they were a focus area within our company. It was a professional process to be part of (ER7).

I know this is an important part of our company. The apprenticeship programme and artisans. I felt that from the start of the selection process (AP1).

I didn't really know what to expect in this process. It was really nice being part of it. I learned more about myself and the company (AP8).

This need for the positive impact of a selection process on applicants has been highlighted in the literature. There are several obvious consequences of this, ranging from a better sense of belonging to improved and immediate engagement with the employer (Anderson et al., 2010; Chan, 2016; Jacoby & Lerman, 2019; Schmitt, 2014; Trindale, 2015; Wildschut et al., 2012).

In this study, even the applicants who were not successful in this selection process had positive words about the selection process:

I didn't make it. But when I was going through the selection process I felt like I was part of the apprenticeship programme already. Like I belonged. Sounds funny. But that's how I felt' (AL1).

I didn't get selected. But I felt important like in the way they did it (AL6).

This has significant ramifications in terms of the status of an apprenticeship as a career. The professionalization of the artisan career has been widely noted as a key consideration in the literature (Altreiter, 2021; Cedefop, 2017; Evans-Klock, 2012; Pandor, 2018; Solomon & Mathias, 2020). The low status of apprentices and their training programmes can be thwarted by more positive experiences such as noted by these unsuccessful applicants. Should the country's youth perceive this career grouping more positively it may assist in changing the overall face and status of the career.

Notwithstanding these three affirmative themes, some challenges were also identified by the stakeholder groups. These are discussed in the fourth and final theme recognised within this study.

Theme 4: Challenges within the selection process

The stakeholders raised a range of minor challenges. The first core challenge presented by the employer's representative group was cost. This is succinctly stated in the statement, "It's very expensive" by ER2.

The other core challenge was the mathematics issue. Both the apprentice and applicant groups found this to be significant.

The maths test was hard. I struggled, But I made it!' (AP7).

I asked why I didn't make it through. They said it was because of the maths. It was very challenging. But it makes sense (AL4).

These two challenges need to be viewed within the broader purpose and context of human resource selection. Adopting incomplete and cheaper selection processes may seem effective in the short term. However, these processes may not produce all the benefits derived from the selection process commented on in this study. Short-cuts may be cheaper, and some applicants may prefer a softer selection journey, but poor selection decisions can be exceedingly costly, on many fronts, for employers (Jacoby & Lerman, 2019; Mueller & Wolter, 2014; Solomon & Mathias, 2020; Trindale, 2015).

The four findings of this study have practical implications. These and some recommendations are indicated in the next section.

5. Managerial Implications

As indicated previously, the four-stage apprentice selection advocated by Puchert et al. (2022) was employed in the two companies that participated in this study. In these companies, the supply of apprentice applicants far exceeded the demand. On average, approximately 6% of the applicants are accepted and complete the apprenticeship programme each year. The additional information sources provided through the various stages of this screening process helped to screen through these applicant pools effectively. An in-depth and rigorous staffing process, as recommended by multiple experts in the field such as Goastellec and Ruiz (2015); Imdorf (2017); Lovender (2015), satisfied the employer representatives' need for the correct individuals to be identified. Furthermore, the tracking and feedback mechanisms within this selection process ensured that the applicants knew throughout the process where their strengths and development areas were, ensuring their confidence was boosted (Wildschut et al., 2012) and they knew what aspects they needed to work on before applying again. This allowed even the rejected applicants to have a positive developmental experience during the selection process, thereby maintaining the brand and reputation of the two employing companies (Anderson et al., 2010; Schmitt, 2014; Trindale, 2015).

The finding around the positive impact of this selection process is crucial. Previous research has highlighted that a sense of belonging was a key factor influencing beginning apprentices' decisions to enter and commit to an apprenticeship (Chan, 2016). This impact finding then aligns with recommendations to professionalise the artisan career path (Evans-Klock, 2012; Pandor, 2018; Solomon & Mathias, 2020) and raise the existing low status of VET (Altreiter, 2021; Cedefop, 2017). Through initiatives such as a high-standard selection process, the mindset of the country's youth can be shifted towards embracing being an apprentice and viewing VET as a practical path towards a worthy career. Through both the apprentice and applicant groups' experiencing this selection process as positive, the image and reputation of the two companies were also protected (Schmitt, 2014; Trindale, 2015).

Another interesting angle to the study's findings stems from the selection process' efficiency. The statements made by the stakeholder groups confirm the literature where authors have consistently expounded on the need for apprentices to have a broader range of employability skills than just those of a technical nature. Those who have postulated this in the literature include Kazancoglu and Ozkan-Ozen (2018); Kochan et al. (2018); Laberge et al. (2016), as well as Maisiri and Van Dyk (2021). Whilst literature posited by Mustapha and Greenan (2002) advocates for apprenticeship programmes to integrate these employability and technical skills into the curriculum, the two employing companies within this research study preferred to make the employability skills part of their selection process.

Rather than incorporating the training of these skills into the apprenticeship programme, they selected those that already had the basis of these employability skills and aimed to build on that core foundation.

The first challenge outlined in this study relates to cost. The selection process employed by the two participating companies comprised four stages, including psychometric testing and competency-based assessments. Whilst it has been established that secondary education type (incorporating subject choice) can be a cost-effective preliminary selection method (Puchert et al., 2017a, 2017b), short-cuts can lead to poor selection decisions, which can be even more costly for employers (Mueller & Wolter, 2014). The other benefits outlined in the three previous themes also add weight to the worth of this selection process.

The second espoused challenge listed pertained to the mathematical testing component of the selection process. The aptitude test requires mental mathematical skills (Puchert et al., 2022). ABCMA (2018); Brewer (2013); Forsblom et al. (2016); Imdorf and Leemann (2012) as well as Lodovici et al. (2013) argue that numerical skills are necessary. This challenge, therefore, adds voice to recommendations in the literature for work readiness workshops (Brewer, 2013; Shankar et al., 2016) and other applicant preparation sessions to assist the youth to be more successful in their application process (Azar et al., 2013; Fox, 2018; Puchert et al., 2022).

6. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

The study aimed to investigate the perceptions of an apprenticeship selection process from the perspective of three stakeholder groups: the employer, the apprentice, and the applicant. The findings reveal the positives and negatives of this selection process and are expressed within four central themes. As a contribution, the study answers the call for studies that investigate the role of staffing practices within apprenticeship programmes and the success of artisans (Forsblom et al., 2016; Imdorf & Leemann, 2012; Puchert et al., 2017a, 2017b). Specifically, this paper gives voice to the various stakeholders in this artisan problem and highlights the credence of a selection process from their perspectives. This in-depth and rigorous selection process should be replicated and employed across industries and sectors as recommended by discipline experts, notably Goastellec and Ruiz (2015); Imdorf (2017), and Lovender (2015). This selection process was deemed to be fair and transparent, as well as efficient in identifying the unique skill set required of apprentices (Kazancoglu & Ozkan-Ozen, 2018; Kochan et al., 2018; Laberge et al., 2016; Maisiri & Van Dyk, 2021). The process was positively received by all the groups, deemed to be developmental and encouraged a sense of belonging (Chan, 2016; Schmitt, 2014; Trindale, 2015).

Another critical recommendation stemming from this study is the need for work readiness and applicant preparation workshops to ensure compliance and success in the application and selection processes (Azar et al., 2013; Brewer, 2013; Fox, 2018; Puchert et al., 2022; Shankar et al., 2016). Selection is an ignored issue in the artisan problem. Future research should focus on this issue as a potential contributing factor to enhancing the profession's status and attracting more youth to this career opportunity. Being the first study of its nature in SA, this study should be replicated in other automotive companies and other market sectors. A larger sample is also needed of unsuccessful applicants as only six were drawn from one company in this study.

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