

t The skills shortage in South Africa is a very real concern. According to Productivity SA and the 2007 IMD World Competiveness yearbook, South Africa had the worst skills shortage of 55 countries surveyed.

In the Sunday Times of 30 March 2008 it was reported that, "South Africa must find at least 115,000 IT professionals before the World Cup," and, "by 2015, South Africa faces a shortage of 94,000 teachers," but, "only 4,000 new teachers enter the job market each year against a need of 20,000." Similarly, the South African Institute for Chartered Accountants (SAICA) says the country is short of 20,000 chartered accountants.

The situation has been further exacerbated by the continuing brain drain. South Africa's Institute for Race Relations estimates that around 800,000 skilled South Africans emigrated between 1995 and 2005. It went on to say that the option to emigrate is most popular among people aged between 18 and 44, representing not only South Africa's current workforce but its future skills set as well. The research undertaken also showed that the decision to emigrate is no longer the preserve of whites: the number of blacks and coloureds considering emigration shot up by 20% and 30% respectively in 2008.

The scarcity of skills is not just a South African problem. Worldwide, seven out of 10 managers report that skills shortages are their most pressing problem.

WHERE WILL SKILLED WORKERS COME FROM?

It is time for employers to look to hitherto untapped talent sources for their talent needs. One such source is the pool of disabled people ready, willing and able to perform certain

skilled functions in the workplace.

The employment of people with disabilities should therefore no longer be seen as merely a social responsibility exercise but as a genuine avenue of sourcing qualified and hard-working people in today's skills-starved environment.

There is limited reliable information available on the number of people with disabilities in South Africa. The government uses an estimate of between five percent and 12 percent of the total population in their Integrated Disability Strategy White Paper.

If the current population sits at about 47 million, the amount of people with disabilities in the country must number between 235,000 and 564,000. If, according to the 2001 census – the most recent statistic available to us, 80% of people with a disability are unemployed, that means there are between 188,000 and 451,200 people that could be brought into the country's workforce.

The Employment Equity Act of 1998 says that two percent of a company's workforce must be represented by employees with a disability. The Act recognises many disabling conditions including arthritis, brain injury, cancer, chronic pain, cumulative trauma disorders, HIV/AIDS, multiple chemical sensitivity, sight impairments, development disabilities, diabetes, epilepsy, hearing loss, blindness, heart conditions, multiple sclerosis, psychiatric impairment and wheelchair users.

Yet despite this minimal requirement, companies are failing to meet the target. The problem seems to be an aversion to employ people with disabilities due to various misconceptions.

The first is the mistaken belief that people with disabilities do not have the right skills. The fact is that people with disabilities develop important

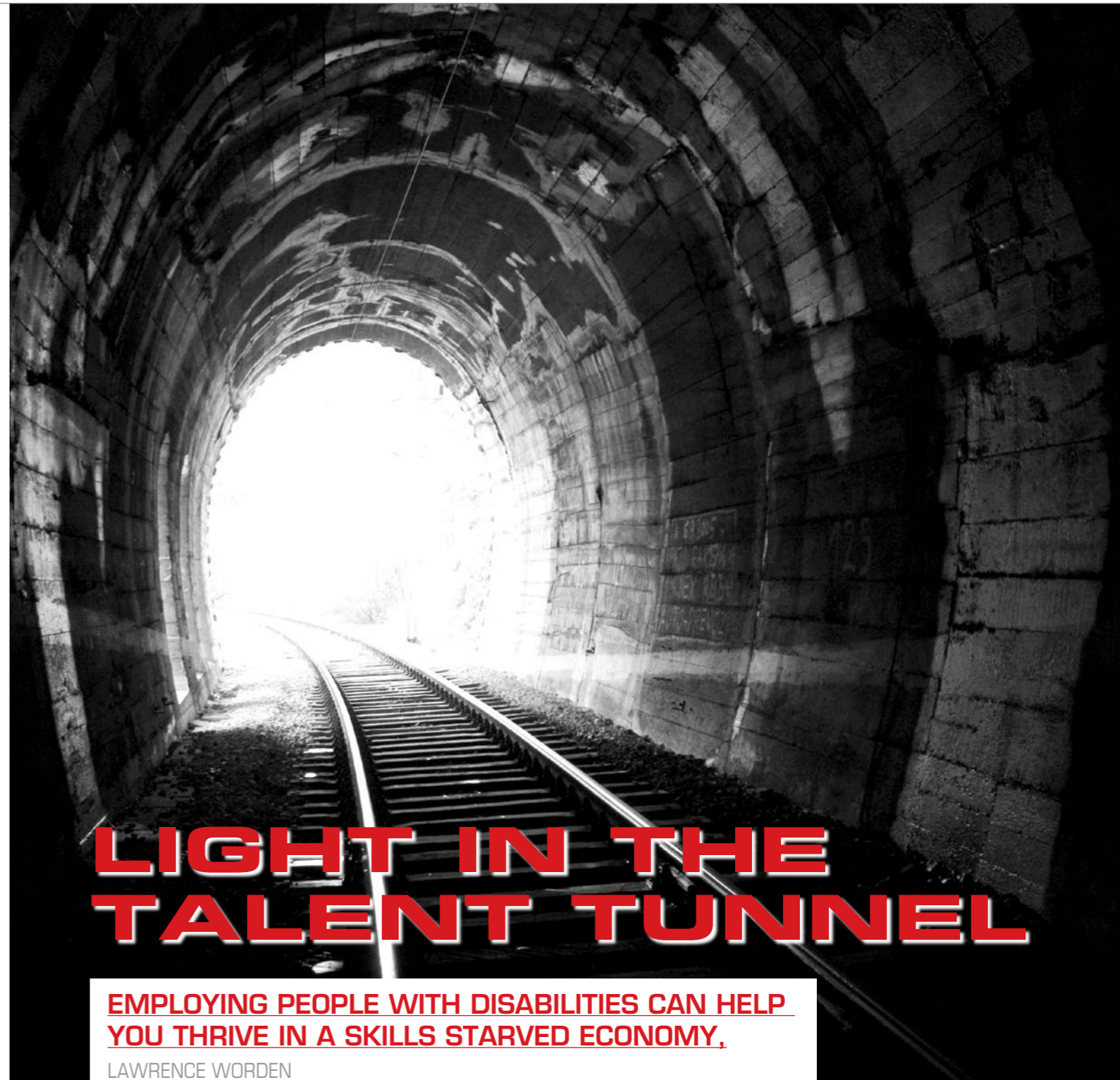
critical thinking skills. Whether people were born with a disability or they acquired one in life, such people must develop other strengths, traits and qualities including perseverance, problem solving, goal setting and determination, all of which make them valuable and marketable in the workplace.

People with disabilities also bring unique characteristics and skills to the workplace. As an example, a manufacturer had difficulty retaining employees in a high-noise area of the plant: the workers were complaining about headaches. By employing someone who was deaf, the problem was solved.

The second misconception is that accommodating people with disabilities in the workplace is too costly. Many employers believe that they will have to change their physical structures, every desk and every doorway to accommodate people with disabilities. However, research done in America found that the vast majority (73%) of employers reported that their workers with disabilities did not require accommodations.

It should also be noted that employers make accommodations all the time with their able-bodied staff. Examples include permission to go to the doctor, not asking an employee with a bad back to lift a heavy box or not requiring an employee with poor eyesight to read fine print, all of which cost nothing. If you are doing something out of the ordinary, you are accommodating the people you work with without even thinking about it.

The third misconception is that co-workers will be uncomfortable and that their productivity will be negatively affected. In fact, workers with disabilities have a positive effect on co-workers. Watching someone who has overcome a major challenge in his or her life and manages the disability on the job raises morale and provides a good working environment



LIGHT IN THE TALENT TUNNEL

EMPLOYING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES CAN HELP YOU THRIVE IN A SKILLS STARVED ECONOMY,

LAWRENCE WORDEN

for everyone. Most companies have found that after employing people with disabilities, employee morale and productivity increased and there was a noticeable decrease in turnover.

The last misconception is that getting information on how to hire people with disabilities is time consuming and complicated. There are

a number of NGOs in South Africa that look after and promote the interests of people with disabilities including the South African National Council for the Blind, the QuadPara Association of South Africa and the Association for the Physically Disabled.

These organisations will meet with companies to help address the

psychological barriers employers and staff might face when employing people with disabilities. As part of the education process, they will cover the 'Code of Good Practice on Key Aspects of Disability in the Workplace', which is a guide for promoting fair treatment and reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities. *(HR)*