

Jobs in the labour relations field

In South Africa, employers and employees are regularly confronted by different forms of industrial actions, retrenchment, unfair labour practices, strikes, changes in employment conditions, performance problems, disputes, and court cases about labour relations issues, etc. The field which is related to these matters in the workplace, is known as labour relations. In this field there are different professions which can be pursued after the applicable academic qualification has been obtained, or if the person received the correct exposure. The general study fields which are needed for professions within the labour relations field is usually one of the following:

- BCom Human Resources Management
- BA with Industrial Psychology as a main subject
- LLB with specialisation in Labour Law

There are different fields in which you can specialise according to your specific interest.

Trade unions

An employee has the right to a job with fair remuneration, but when these rights are violated, the employee needs protection. Therefore, many employees join trade unions to enjoy representation when disputes arise. Trade unions is thus responsible to represent and protect employees in the workplace.

Organisational rights are given to trade unions on the grounds of the number of members registered at the specific trade union. Therefore, a trade union like Solidarity may represent its members collectively in the workplace when a certain percentage of the employees are Solidarity members. In such cases, it is referred to as organisational rights which means that the trade union has bargaining rights. The trade union receives the right to represent the members collectively, and in most cases, also individually in work-related cases.

If the number of employees belonging to a trade union, falls under a certain percentage, or if only a few members belong to the trade union, it is referred to as non-organised workplaces. In such cases service is offered to members individually regarding individual disputes or issues like disciplinary hearing or grievances. They enjoy protection, but the focus is on the specific dispute in which the employee finds himself or herself. A trade union may not negotiate better salaries for individual members.

In cases where a trade union has full organisational rights, there are employees who represent the members of the union in the workplace. They are known as shop stewards. The shop stewards are employees of the company who were elected by the members to handle enquiries or problems and to continuously communicate with the trade union.

Union official

The people with whom the shop stewards co-operate in the trade union, are called union officials or organisers. They are permanent employees of the trade union and support the shop stewards and handle the trade union members' labour relations issues in the workplace. These issues vary from dismissal to grievances, changes in employment conditions to collective bargaining, or consultations on behalf of a group of members at a specific company.

Labour practitioner or labour consultant

A labour consultant is someone who offers specialised labour relations support or labour law advice to employers or employees. They are independent of companies and employees they represent and mostly have their own practices. A labour consultant may normally not represent

an employee in the workplace or at the CCMA, unless there is agreement among all parties involved. Labour consultants are specialists and usually write policy documents and procedures for companies, offer advice, write letters on behalf of their clients, and offer telephonic advice. The law or a professional body does not regulate this profession currently, which may lead to charlatans or “fly by night” consultants leaving employees and employers in the lurch.

Employee relations manager/practitioner

These people are employed by companies and are responsible for the company’s labour relations function in total. The staff member or members of the team represent the company in all labour relations-related cases with individual members or negotiations with trade unions. This profession is a specialist job within the Human Resources Department.

Mediator

This profession entails the specific task to be a mediator when there is conflict or a dispute between a trade union and the employer. A mediator is therefore an impartial intermediary who is appointed by the parties in conflict to handle a specific case, for example, during salary negotiations and retrenchments. Their task is to bring about consensus between the different parties. When the parties struggle to reach consensus, they may decide to grant the mediator the necessary rights to deliver judgement or to arbitrate. People who consider this as a profession usually start off as academics, a union official, or a labour relations manager after which they become specialists in the field. The necessary traits for this profession are good personal relationships and in-depth knowledge, as well as a high level of emotional intelligence and the ability to perform under pressure. A mediator should also possess very well developed persuasive abilities and must be a good listener.

Labour lawyer

These people must have obtained at least a LLB degree and their main focus is litigation within the labour relations field. A labour law litigator can be either part of a law firm which focuses on labour law, or he or she can establish a practice.

Health and safety officers

In South Africa, all workplaces are not equally safe and healthy, but the law requires that all employees have the right to work in safe and healthy places. Therefore, every employer must ensure that all workplaces are safe and healthy, and all employees must accept responsibility for their own health and safety and also the health and safety of others at work.

There are specialists who are appointed to assist employers and employees to ensure health and safety in the workplace – they are called Health and Safety Officers. These officers are responsible to conduct risk analyses and to then submit recommendations on how to reduce the risk factors. They further assist employees to utilise their rights and provide advice on health and safety issues. If an accident or incident occurs in which an employee was injured or had died, they are responsible to conduct the investigation to find out what the causes were. They therefore also assist with claims regarding occupational health.

All the professions described above involves more than just an academic background. Soft skills, rather than knowledge, are almost more important to perform their duties effectively. The core of these jobs is to establish or restore relationships and therefore they work with people continuously and communication skills are critically important.