



The struggle of a young professional

Hilton Tommy Stevens
PSSA YPG PRO

Nihil sub sole novum – There is nothing new under the sun – a common phrase. While I was growing up, my mother and grandmother were big on focusing on what needed to be done but they necessarily emphasised the balancing of numerous roles. Famous quotes in the household included, “Just focus on school first, then you can... First get your degree, then...”. In many ways, young pharmacists go through the same experience. Pharmacy students focus only on academics during their university phase. When they become young pharmacists in the work field, they only focus on working. This and other factors have contributed to the glaringly evident lack of active young pharmacists within the associations and societies of the profession.

Sacrifice the time to support and acknowledge the sacrifice of others

Sylvia Earle, American scientist, author, and lecturer once said, “The best scientists and explorers have the attributes of kids! They ask questions and have a sense of wonder. They have curiosity. ‘Who, what, where, why, when and how!’ They never stop asking questions, and I never stop asking questions, just like a five year old.” When we ask why young pharmacists aren’t willing to sacrifice their time after work, a few responses surface.

The priorities of a young pharmacist

I regret not finding statistics (apologies to my lecturers) that reflect the high number of young people in South Africa who are focussed on “creating wealth”, “making money”, “being rich” as their top priority. These priorities come at the expense of time spent on any additional activities. Ways of achieving that goal include enrolling in additional studies in order to attain executive leadership roles, accompanied by handsome salaries and benefits in the near future. Their objective is therefore to be influential, augmented with the monetary reward.

The Bachelor of Pharmacy programme is one that consumes any student. For the years required to get the degree, every day is filled with either lectures or practicals, and between those slots and weekends, it is time spent preparing for practicals and group work or reviewing the week’s academic content. The time available for anything else is limited and there is eager anticipation of free time after graduation, which is planned with the same determination as the first car. It is therefore no surprise that it’s nearly impossible to ask young professionals for time outside of their work time when they can’t see the intrinsic value of sacrificing their time.

Value

We subconsciously measure the time spent with what we value, and with what makes us happy. The perceived value of professional associations and societies, viewed by young professionals, is shared across many other professions as well. Amanda Kaiser wrote an article titled *Young professionals are not joining associations, but not for the reasons we think*. Much of her content reflects the reality in the South African pharmacy profession. She starts by sharing her experience of her first meeting hosted by her professional association and only seeing “grey hair” (no offense to anyone, I myself have streaks of wisdom starting to sprout on my head). This highlighted the age-gap problem. This very problem is the reason why the International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP) gave birth to the Young Pharmacists' Group (YPG) and why organisations such as the Pharmaceutical Society of South Africa (PSSA) have strongly pushed for young pharmacists to get involved in the Society.

Another reason for their non-involvement is that they don't see how being part of associations or societies will benefit, or have relevance in, their careers and lives. Some may not see the relevance immediately, but they will later when they are in managerial positions, because they associate the professional body with established pharmacists.

Do we have the answers? No, but we have recommendations.

Perception

Young professionals need to spend time on the various platforms within the professional associations/societies to remove the myths and perceptions related to the value and relevance of age in these professional bodies.

“Help me to help you”

Information and data are said to be the new gold. Understanding the needs and space in which young pharmacists find themselves is the only way to attract and

accommodate them. They find themselves in transitional phases due to new careers and roles. The associated need is possibly learning methods or how to balance their life. Jacqueline Smith, a blogger on leadership topics, lists *8 ways to achieve better work-Life balance*. She advises that technology must make your life easier, not control it, and that we need to learn how to say “No!” Additional skill sets such as learning to prioritise time can also be included. Young people need advice on entrepreneurship and how to market themselves too. These are needs or skill sets that can easily be provided to young professionals.

Sacrifice the time to support and acknowledge the sacrifice of the youth

The call for conversation about mentorship is not new. Even though the groundwork has been done in preparing a programme in the PSSA, it is still essential to identify young people in the Society, and to coach and mentor them. This should happen irrespective of whether there is a formal programme in place. It is expected of those in leadership roles.

Academia has the most access to young people. Even though they are not yet qualified, students have societies and clubs, with events that require the support of staff. In my experience of planning and hosting student events, from my student days until today, I can attest that the number of staff members present at all these events is dismally low.

I have no doubt that the challenge of absorbing young professionals will be solved in the coming years. Until we reach this milestone, we must continue conversations around this topic and ensure that all necessary parties are always present through these dialogues. Yes, there are frustrations for all parties involved, but, whether young or older, it is important to listen and empathise instead of blame and point fingers. When we reach the required milestones within the professional bodies, everyone will benefit. In the same breath, everyone needs to come to the party to ensure the required outcome. See you there!