

What training opportunities are there for the forensic handwriting examiner in South Africa?

Koppenhaver (2002) explains that there are document examiners, who claim that there is only one way of obtaining training, but just as with any field of study, there are different avenues of acquiring skills and knowledge. This is true for South Africa too. In South Africa there are two distinct groups of forensic handwriting examiners. One group has obtained training through government structures and in this case, the South African Police Services, many of them moving on to private practice, and the other group, forensic handwriting examiners, who have obtained their skills in a number of ways, including online courses, self study and continuous education classes which are generally online since there are no such continuous education classes in South Africa. These skills are often obtained with formal qualifications, such as degrees in related fields as the foundation.

Ellen (2003, p 4), states that 'the wide range of disciplines involved in document examination, do not lend themselves to one single academic qualification.' As handwriting is a complex human behaviour, it will require some knowledge of biology, psychology, chemistry, statistics, neuroscience. Lindblom (Kelly & Lindblom 2006), explain that handwriting examiners bring varied academic backgrounds, from chemistry and physics to psychology, sociology and criminal justice. The debate around training ranges from completing an apprenticeship, to obtaining skills through practice and self study. Training also includes, according to Lindblom (in Kelly & Lindblom 2006), prescribed reading of books, presentations, published articles.

6.1 Accreditation of Training

It is important to raise the issue of accreditation of training in South Africa. Government training is regarded by those who have acquired their training through government institutions, as superior to those who have acquired it privately since they do a 2 year apprenticeship and one year of practical case work. There is a distorted perception that those who have acquired their training privately are 'graphologists', and that they are not competent to conduct forensic handwriting examinations. This problem is experienced by private forensic handwriting examiners, the world over. Ironically, though, these government courses which are usually in the form of an apprenticeship, have not been peer reviewed and accredited. And this is simply because there is no regulatory or accreditation body in South Africa for this science. An

apprenticeship is only as effective as the mentor who provides it and since no standard exists, such apprenticeships cannot be regarded as the standard for training quality. Further, private FHE's are often required to have achieved tertiary qualifications above and beyond the skills and knowledge of forensic handwriting examination. These include a knowledge of psychology, statistics, neuroscience, research skills and report writing. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that few accredited courses exist to determine the FHE's quality of skills and expertise and these are mostly at senior degree level, such as a 1 year Masters degree in Document Examination, outside of South Africa.

A number of criteria has been put forward as necessary for a document examiner to be regarded as skilled, the most important of which is a thorough understanding of the dynamics of handwriting.

Poynter (2005) says that qualifications may be academic or operational, general or specific.

These include:

- ☐ University education which ensures a minimum intellectual level; which suggests an ability to think abstractly and analytically
- ☐ A basic understanding of chemistry and the electromagnetic spectrum if the document examiner will be involved in ink and paper analysis
- ☐ A basic understanding of psychology to understand human behaviour
- ☐ A basic understanding of statistical analysis
- ☐ Professional competence in forensic science
- ☐ Continuous professional development in the field of document examination as a discipline in forensic science

Hilton (1982, 405) explains that in the absence of any regulatory authority or accreditation body to standardise forensic document examination, the expert witness should inform the court about the 'special knowledge he has gained through study and experience.' 'It is up to the court to decide whether the background and work the witness has done is sufficient to classify him as an expert.' According to Hilton (1982), there is no academic institution where the document examiner is able to study. He mentions that some universities offer special courses on questioned document examination but that these are basic. He further advocates 'self-study as the means of gaining this special knowledge' and that some have been able to supplement this self study with an apprenticeship. However, since Hilton's 1982 publication, a couple of American and English universities are offering senior degrees of one year duration, in document examination.

Koppenhaver (2002), also lists ways of obtaining training to include independent reading, study, experimentation or apprenticeship as there are no standard training programmes for document examiners.

Allen (2016) on the other hand states that the UK Council for the Registration of Forensic Practitioners places the measure of expertise on actual cases, rather than on formal qualifications. What is important is how the expert approaches the case, 'the methodology

used, the interpretation of results, the data in the context of alternative hypotheses' and the writing of appropriate reports.

As mentioned before, forensic document examiners come from all academic disciplines, including science, psychology and other disciplines, upon which they build the foundation of knowledge of forensic document examination. This coupled with experience from on the job training, makes for a solid knowledge of forensic document examination, although Ellen (2003) states that experience is no guarantee of competence. Kam, Found & Rogers (2002) found in their research that there was no relationship between the number of years of experience and the degree of accuracy or error rate achieved by individuals.

Langenberg (2012), lists other skills which the expert witness should have, which include the prerequisite higher order thinking skills of synthesis and integration, sound reasoning ability and problem solving. Experts should further, demonstrate meta-cognitive awareness, which is an awareness of their own thinking patterns and knowledge limitations as well as the ability to do reflection. Meta-cognitive awareness and the ability to reflect allow for the expert to recognize when limitations and thinking patterns call for adjustments in strategies.

Other skills which do not come through any formal qualification, but rather through experience, include being able to pay attention to detail, have an enquiring mind, and a methodical approach.

Burgde (2010) states that 'The industry standard is established by ASTM (American Society for Testing and Materials) Standard E2388-05, "Standard Guide for Minimum Training Requirements for Forensic Document Examiners," and includes only a bachelor's degree and, literally, "excellent eyesight." The ASTM standard goes on to recommend two years of full time training under the supervision of an experienced document examiner. There is no known in-classroom formal degreed education available in the United States, although correspondence and internet classes do exist.' South Africa faces the same dearth of standard, accredited courses and no regulatory body overseeing the quality of work or training of document examiners.

So from the above, it is clear, that there are no standard courses which qualify one forensic handwriting expert or document examiner academically superior to another. It is also clear, that there are no regulatory bodies to oversee the quality of the work of forensic document examiners.

Skills and knowledge are much broader than understanding the dynamics of handwriting and the methodologies used in forensic handwriting/document examination and these as listed above, come with experience. To date, there is no standard approach to the training of document examiners. However, this does not mean, that there are no excellent forensic handwriting examiners out there. Those who have made it their business to work at acquiring the skills and knowledge and to seek out continuous professional development, who work to advance this applied science, do provide a quality, reliable and professional service.