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Women, blacks still in soft portfolios

By Leon Engelbrecht

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Black South Africans and women are still largely assigned to soft portfolios on the boards of ICT companies, says Landelahni Business Leaders CEO Sandra Burmeister.

She says the preliminary finding from a study being conducted on 110 ICT organisations in the private and public sectors, listed and unlisted, shows the industry is now where the mining sector was at the beginning of the century.

“When we did our first mining survey in 2001, the only blacks and women you saw in mining would have been in human resources and if you were lucky, in marketing and communications, the really soft skills,” Burmeister says.

“When we did our second survey in 2005, you would have started to see a shift. The 2006 survey shows they now have a real presence in the operational side of the business,” she says.

“ICT shows the classic profile... you don't have large numbers of women going into engineering, mining and computer science. So you will find the gender profile around the softer skills. The race profile is pretty much the same,” Burmeister adds.

She says the construction and mining industries have made significant progress on affirmative action and board-level representivity in recent years. “Construction not so much on gender, but defiantly on race; mining has made significant progress on both, but I think that is because of government pressure through licences,” she explains.

“There is no reason why we can't see a ground shift in ICT as we've already seen with the two predominantly male-focused industries... but at the end of the day that requires will,” she says.

Costly perceptions

It may also require a change in perception. Burmeister notes some industry executives are concerned ICT is no longer seen as “sexy” and this has affected recruitment and staff retention.

The executives have said they are not sure why or how this state of affairs came about. “Have they considered that other sectors have perhaps become more ‘sexy’, such as mining, where the salaries are better and – because of government licences – black ownership possibilities are

greater?”

Burmeister adds that another perception costing the industry is that it is a young person's preserve. A positive aspect of this is that the average age of ICT directors is lower than the overall norm. The disadvantage is that many ICT professionals, who would otherwise mature to board level appointments, leave the industry when they get married and have children.

“It's a case of you say ‘Oooh! I must get a job as a CIO in industry so I get all my benefits and have security of tenure’, and then they're gone,” Burmeister says.

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