

Creative approach needed for skills development

A multi-pronged approach is needed to galvanise the construction industry into addressing its employment equity imbalances and boosting levels of skills development, according to Sandra Burmeister, CEO of the Landelahni Recruitment Group.

According to a recent survey conducted by Landelahni, the construction industry is not currently well-placed to meet the challenges of rapid infrastructure development.

"The delivery thrust is likely to exceed current capacity," says Burmeister. "With huge infrastructure demands, the industry is going to have to come up with some innovative solutions."

The construction industry employs some 935 000 people - both permanent and temporary, representing 8% of the country's workforce. The years from 2001 to 2005 saw a 27% increase in employment, making the sector the third highest job creator after trade and finance.

"The construction industry in SA has caught up with the global infrastructure boom," says Burmeister. "The industry was in recession for much of the 80s and 90s, and now faces a situation where engineers and artisans are in short supply both locally and globally. In addition, the industry has suffered from being seen as male-dominated, unglamorous and lacking career growth opportunities.

"For these reasons, the construction industry is not shaping up well when it comes to employment equity. According to Department of Labour reports, only 15% of top management in the sector is black, against 27% across all industries. Not surprisingly, only 4% of top management is female, compared to an all-industry average of 17%."

Of far greater concern, argues Burmeister, is the lack of successful skills development initiatives in the sector. "The fall-out rate among tertiary education students is alarming," she says.

Between 1998 and 2004, 50 570 people enrolled at SA

universities for engineering courses and 8 900 graduated, according to Engineering Council of SA (ECSA) statistics. That is a graduation rate of 17,5% across all engineering disciplines.

The graduation rate for engineers is even lower at technicians. Between 1998 and 2004 there were 139 820 enrolments and 14 250 graduates - a graduation rate of 10% across all disciplines. Construction-specific disciplines display the same trends.

Artisan training has dropped dramatically over the past 30 years. Whereas in 1975 there were 33 000 apprentices in training across all industries, by 2005 the number of apprentices had dropped to 1 440.

"More encouraging," says Burmeister, "is the increase in Engineering Council registrations of new candidates, particularly blacks, indicating that companies are registering a diversity

of employees. The 2004 intake is balanced, with 907 blacks and 940 whites being

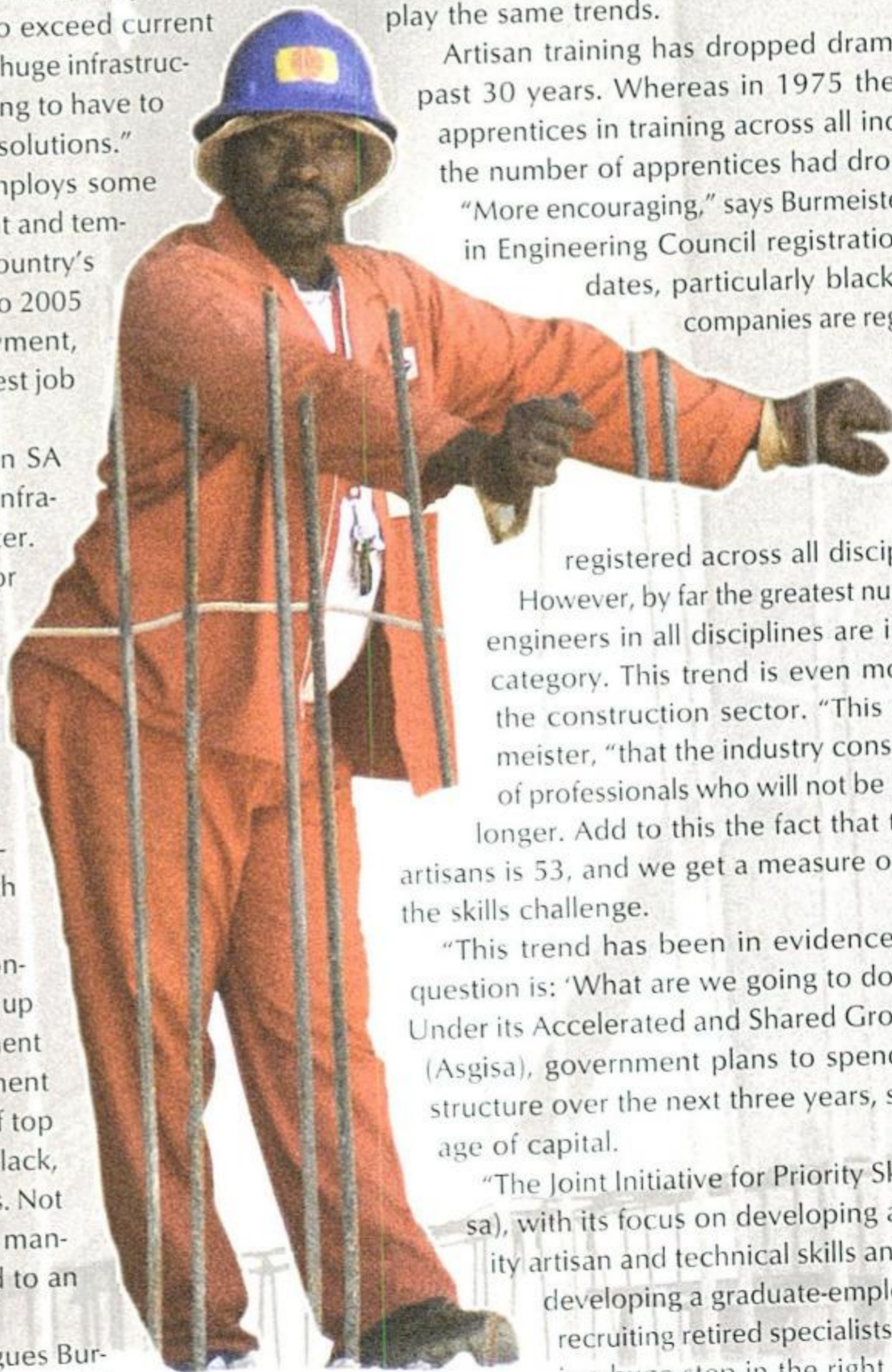
registered across all disciplines."

However, by far the greatest numbers of registered engineers in all disciplines are in the professional category. This trend is even more in evidence in the construction sector. "This means," says Burmeister, "that the industry consists predominantly of professionals who will not be in the system much longer. Add to this the fact that the average age of artisans is 53, and we get a measure of the magnitude of the skills challenge.

"This trend has been in evidence for years. So the question is: 'What are we going to do to turn it around?' Under its Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative of SA (Asgisa), government plans to spend R372bn on infrastructure over the next three years, so there is no shortage of capital.

"The Joint Initiative for Priority Skills Acquisition (Jipisa), with its focus on developing and recruiting priority artisan and technical skills and, in the short-term, developing a graduate-employment strategy and recruiting retired specialists and expert mentors, is a huge step in the right direction.

"However, the private sector needs to join government in implementing far-reaching training and skills development initiatives if we are to meet development goals ahead of Soccer World Cup 2010 - and beyond."



The construction industry is already ahead of the all-industry average in training at the management and professional level. "This," says Burmeister, "is appropriate given the growth in the sector. However, training at technician level lags the industry average. When it comes to training of black employees, construction lags the industry average at all levels.

"The construction industry needs to think more creatively about skills acquisition and employment equity and embark on a multi-pronged strategy. Importing skills at a significant cost is a short-term solution, and needs to be balanced by more effective use of local project and contract labour. We need to accept that more and more skilled professionals will be working on projects around the globe, and to encourage this as a way of accelerating skills development.

"A solid graduate programme that goes beyond merely providing bursaries to black candidates is also required. Graduate development programmes need to focus on ensuring that we achieve a higher number of graduates. Business can then play a more significant role to provide the necessary support, guidance, career planning, mentoring and coaching."

Once they have graduated and are employed, a fast-track programme for black candidates with management potential is needed so they can achieve executive status within the company, particularly on the operational side.

"Beyond that," says Burmeister, "external recruitment strategies need to be developed to address both the skills shortage and to ensure that senior positions are occupied by black people. Often potential candidates exist at executive and management level in other industries, with transferable skills.

"It is important to remember that, particularly at senior level, construction is not just about engineers. It is about introducing fresh leadership and management talent into the industry. That is one way of giving the sector a capability boost in the short term, so as to help the country achieve its immediate infrastructure development goals."

About the construction survey

The Landelahni research survey evaluated employment equity and skills development trends in the construction industry particularly as they relate to scarce technical, professional and management skills.

The survey sample was drawn from the Construction Industry Development Board's 2006 list of registered contractors tendering for projects in excess of R30m, and also included consulting engineering firms employing more than 200 people.

A total of 65 companies totalling some 80 000 permanent employees was surveyed.

CETA and Business

Two new projects to speed the pace of training in construction industry sectors where skills are in especially short supply have got under way with the

signing of co-operation agreements between CETA and private business.

One of the agreements, with Corobrik will see the establishment of special bricklaying, paving and plastering schools in KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng and the Western Cape. In the second agreement, a school specialising in plumbing skills will open at the NCISA Training Academy in Soweto. This will be operated by the plumbing skills training company, Plumb Train.

The agreements bring reality to a CETA strategy to broaden the scope of its skills development incentives by establishing a network of professionally staffed training 'campuses' - called Construction Centres of Excellence (CCOEs) - to make it easier for people wanting to enter the construction industry to receive formal skills instruction.

"It has always been our hope that we could do this with the support and co-operation of private business," says CETA CEO, Teboho Thejane. "That we have been able to enlist the support of a company of the status of Corobrik is very encouraging for the future of the CCOE concept."

CETA chairman, Narius Moloto, says CCOEs are aimed at ensuring 'universal access' to education, training and skills development for individuals who are either unemployed new entrants or employed workers. And he adds: "We want to get around the situation where training is available only through employers. We want to open the doors to a wider selection of unemployed people." ■

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