

# 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."



