

Construction mindset change needed to meet 2010 challenge, says report

The South African construction sector needed to change its mindset, and look to supporting longer-term strategies to meet the challenges of the 2010 soccer World Cup, Johannesburg-based Landelahni group CEO Sandra Burmeister emphasised on Tuesday.

Speaking at the company's presentation of the findings of its 2006 construction industry research report, Burmeister showed that, although skills development was on the rise in the building sector, it was lagging behind the levels that were required.

She highlighted that participation from blacks and women in the sector was "dismal", with the average board representation as low as 25%.

A similar study conducted on the mining industry earlier this year showed that women and blacks had accounted for an average of 35% representation on local mining companies' directorships.

Seeking out reasons for this, Burmeister highlighted that the total training of blacks in the construction industry was lower than the industry-wide average, while the total number of trained staff in the construction sector at management and professional levels was higher than the rest of the industry.

Low economic growth in the past had resulted in a 'flat' industry that had invested little in skills development for the past decade.

To mitigate this, the country would need consistent training and skills development to meet projected economic growth trends and infrastructure demands.

"The construction industry needs to think more creatively about skills acquisition and employment equity and embark on a multi-pronged strategy, which includes transferable skills and contract labour," Burmeister argued.

Aggravating the skills shortage, which she said could well be a crisis, was a global skills shortage in the engineering and technical fields that had resulted in large numbers of South Africans leaving the country to work abroad.

Burmeister suggested solutions to the current local skills dearth. "Importing skills is expensive, and is only a short-term solution," she said, adding that more effective use of project and contract labour would help to manage these costs.

Last month, petrochemicals giant Sasol came under heavy criticism after it announced its intention to bring in 1 300 artisans from East Asia to work on repairs and refurbishments at its Secunda works, but later said that it had reduced this number to less than 1 000.

South Africa's unions and industry argued that Sasol should rather focus on developing local skills before seeking to import workers.

"We need to accept that more and more skilled professionals will be working on projects around the globe, and encourage this as a means of accelerating skills development," Burmeister stated.

The local construction sector needed to look at the transferability of skills from other sectors.

Another major problem in the skilling up of workers to enter the construction field was that, since 1998, 12% of all engineering students that enrolled in technikons or universities went on to graduate.

Burmeister suggested that these drop-outs could obtain qualifications quicker if they returned to their studies than new candidates starting at the beginning.


Companies also needed to provide in-service training for diplomats who could not graduate until they had completed in-service training.

Because of the lull that the local building sector went through in the nineties, remunerations were generally lower than other industries, which could also deter skilled people.

"The situation hasn't recovered yet, and we definitely have to address this," Burmeister emphasised.

"If all companies committed to provide some level of training, it would build up the skills base across the industry," she concluded, criticising companies for not providing training, then poaching skilled workers from the few firms that were involved in skills development.



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