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Construction industry scrambles for staff

18 Oct 2006 - Business Day - Sue Blaine and Mathabo le Roux

Intro

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THERE was a training crisis in the construction industry, with 88% of engineering graduates dropping out and a near halt in artisan training, a recruitment specialist said yesterday. SA's short-term need for engineers and technicians would not be met from within the country, said Sandra Burmeister, CEO of Landelahni, a recruitment company that surveys skill development trends in the industry.

With major construction projects and various infrastructure expansion programmes, the Gautrain, and preparations for the 2010 Fifa World Cup coming on board, the industry is scurrying to meet the massive need for human resources. "We are certainly not in a position to feed our current needs, leave alone future needs," says Burmeister.

The shortage of skills was caused by a 20-year lull in the industry and the massive drop-out rate among engineering students at universities and universities of technology, she said. Despite a skills levy being introduced five years ago to boost skills development, training of artisans for the construction sector has dropped from 33000 in 1975 to a tiny 1440 last year.

The skills shortage is repeated across the world and South African companies are having to compete in a global market hungry for those with technical skills. Also, many South African-trained engineers are working abroad. Responsible for a 27% increase in jobs created between 2001 and 2005, the construction industry is SA's highest job creator after trade and finance.

The sector employs 935000 people, 62% of them permanently. And while the sector was lagging the broader economy in transformation, Burmeister felt the skills need was so dire that training should take place, regardless of race, if the country was to meet its growth needs.

"The good news is that there is a recognition that training needs to be done," she said. Training within the industry was 5% above the average for all industries at executive management level, 10% above the norm at management level and 10% below the norm at technical (artisan) level, Burmeister said. The dip at technical level was attributed to there being few technicians in the industry available to be trained by companies. The construction industry needed to support long-term strategies to augment its skills base,

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Burmeister said. Importing skills was costly and a short-term solution.

It was also important to stop viewing mobility in the sector as a bad thing, Burmeister said. "We need to accept that more and more skilled South African professionals will be working on projects across the globe and view it as a positive thing. It accelerates skills acquisition," she said. The trick was to attract these people back to SA. Another South African mindset, which had to change was that not all companies needed to take responsibility for training.

"There has always been a trend in SA for one or two visionary companies to do all the training for a sector ... companies need to believe that they need to train for all of us for the future," Burmeister said.

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