

Opportunities aplenty but not enough skills

There are plenty work opportunities in the construction sector but not enough skilled people.

According to Sandra Burmeister, CEO of the Landelahni Recruitment Group, the Soccer World Cup in 2010 may be just what is needed to galvanise the construction industry into addressing its employment equity imbalances and boosting levels of skills development.

A recent survey conducted by Landelahni Business Leaders shows the construction industry is not currently well-placed to meet the challenges of rapid infrastructure development.

The survey sample included the Construction Industry Development Board's 2006 list of registered contractors tendering for projects in excess of R30-million, as well as consulting engineering firms employing more than 200 people.

A total of 65 companies employing some 80 000 permanent employees in all were surveyed.

"The construction industry in South Africa has caught up with the global infrastructure boom," says Burmeister.

"The industry was in recession in 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."

Of greater concern, argues Burmeister, is the lack of successful skills development initiatives in the sector.

"The fallout rate among tertiary education students is alarming," she says.

Between 1998 and 2004, 50 570 people enrolled at South African universities for engineering courses and 8 900 graduated, according to Engineering Council of SA statistics – a graduation rate of 17,5% across all engineering disciplines.

Artisan training has also dropped alarmingly over the past 30 years from 33 000 apprentices in training across all industries in 1975 to only 1 440 apprentices registered in 2005.

"More encouraging," says Burmeister,

"is the increase in Engineering Council registrations of new candidates, particu-

larly blacks, indicating that companies are registering a diversity of employees.

"The 2004 intake is balanced, with 907 black candidates and 940 whites registering across all disciplines."

Under its Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative of Southern Africa, the government plans to spend R372-billion on infrastructure over the next three years.

So there is no shortage of capital available for skills development, Burmeister points out.

"The Joint Initiative for Priority Skills Acquisition, 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," Burmeister comments.

"However, the private sector needs to

join government in implementing far-reaching training and skills development initiatives."

Burmeister believes the construction industry needs to embark on a multi-pronged strategy. This strategy should include encouraging skilled people to work on a project basis so their skills are not permanently tied and can be utilised more widely.

She also calls for graduate development programmes to ensure that a higher number of engineering students graduates.

"Business can play a more significant role in providing support, guidance, career planning, mentoring and coaching," she says.

"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."





CATALYST: the World Cup is what is needed to galvanise the construction industry.

The construction industry at a glance

- There are 935 000 employees in the sector (62% permanent).
- The sector makes up 8% of total employees in SA (as opposed to mining at 3,6%).
- Between 2001 and 2005 there has been a 27% increase in jobs created in the construction sector.
- It is the 3rd highest job creator after trade and finance.
- The nature of the industry is project based; projects can be geographically remote.
- The global trend is towards fewer permanent staff and more contract/project staff.
- There is a global shortage of engineers and artisans; and an increase in number of infrastructure development projects.
- In South Africa, only 12% of the total number of students enrolled for engineering disciplines (university and technikon), have graduated since 1998.

