

DEVELOPING REAL SKILLS IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

Go into a Grade 10, 11 or 12 class today and ask learners what they want to do when they leave school. Work in banks, IT companies, retail industry, music, you name it and you will find a variety of industries named, with certain exceptions. The trades. It's unlikely you'll hear plumbing, electrician, mechanic or in particular, construction.

Even in an age where jobs are at a premium for school leavers these are professions where you get dirty and are not seen as comfortable, sexy careers.

This doubles the importance of not only enticing young people into this sector, but making sure they are properly trained and given the correct tools to make a sustainable living out of the industry. The age of entitlement, it should be made clear, is over and learners need to be encouraged to embrace self-learning and self-improvement.

There is a thriving construction industry waiting for these young people but are they really going the extra mile to help them enter their doors? And why do we have such a shortage of competent workers when overseas there are qualified people queuing for these jobs?

Perhaps one reason is that South Africa has a different set of challenges when it comes to training and development, not least of which is literacy, which is often not taken into account. Recently 60 candidates were assessed for enrolment on a Learnership with only two meeting the entry requirements comfortably.

What also needs to be focused on is the gap between school leavers' competence and what is required in the real world in terms of their further education. Sadly schools today look only at the academics, whereas for many of our learners practical skills are what are needed.

On a positive note the newly legislated Foundational Learning Competence will make a big difference in addressing these shortcomings.

According to Bernadette Oliphant, CEO of IZWE Training and Development, to produce competent skilled people we need to do a lot more than simply meeting BEE scorecards. "We have to focus on meaningful training and make a difference in the lives of those selected for training. Companies will benefit through increased productivity and have a motivated workforce. Effort should be made to have career paths for employees and training must be planned to achieve maximum benefit for both the company and the learner".

Although many of the larger construction companies are working diligently to ensure training and development remains relevant, there are still major challenges in the construction industry to make a real difference in increasing the skills pool in South Africa.

Investment in training, not just from a monetary point of view, is the key. A major problem with training however lies in the fact that the average construction project does not allow sufficient time for learners to complete a full qualification. Short skills programmes provided locally should also be developed as stepping stones towards the longer term goal.

Compounding this problem is the fact that when one project is completed the company often moves to another area or even province, leaving behind the learners, who once again are without jobs, training and often hope.

So just where do the answers lie? We need training managers with a passion for training and an understanding of the ever-changing framework and legislative requirements. Reputable, accredited providers have the power to really change lives.

“Companies must ensure that only accredited service providers are used and that quality standards are adhered to at all times. Training providers should develop a relationship with their clients and understand their training requirements. Training must be customised to suit the specific needs of the business and in this regard the training provider is very well placed to give input and provide guidance,” comments Oliphant.

A great example of just how well this can work is the Kusile Power Station project where ten unemployed local youth are currently being trained as material testers as part of the targets set in relation to the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA). This is a national qualification, funded by a joint venture of companies, giving hope and inspiration to a group of young people where the future looked bleak.

Another shining example of a successful training programme took place when SANRAL and the North West Province Local Government funded the Supervision of Construction Processes Programme, an NQF Level four certificate completed by 27 men and women from Madidi Village in Mabopane North West.

This qualified them to supervise the use of construction resources and construction work processes, allowing them entry to work as supervisors, foremen and general foremen.

11 of the 27 have successfully registered their Close Corporations and are now listed in the Construction and Industry Development Board as fully fledged contractors, with one learner already tendering for work in the Madibeng Municipality!

A joyous Sibusiso Ndebele, MP, at the launch of the Madidi Road Project summed the situation up succinctly by saying, “Working together we can do more.”

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