

Thought Leadership

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Corporate Mentorship Programmes Key To Bridging Skills Gap Amongst Young Engineers

The current trend in the South African engineering sector appears to be one of rapidly transitioning young engineers into management and leadership positions without them having the necessary experience that comes from years of working on projects. This is the view of Vernon Joubert, General Manager of Dams, Hydropower and Underground Works at GIBB, South Africa's leading black-owned engineering and consulting firm.

"Traditionally engineers have progressed in their careers through time and experience in the industry, taking years before reaching management positions. The recent 'fast track' trend, while assisting in transformation and filling needed management positions, has resulted in a lack of more specialist technical expertise in the industry.

"For businesses to outstand the competition and the unpredictable nature of today, they need to invest time in supporting their most important asset - human capital. This can be achieved through an effective mentorship programme," states Joubert.

With a focus on ensuring growth and sustainability within the engineering industry, both technical and business leaders are vital for the future. "In the past, technical roles were under-recognised, which has resulted in the technical expertise gap we have today, and the expectation that young technical engineers will be fast tracked into either a project management or business management position," explains Joubert, who believes corporate mentorship programmes provide a more solid grounding for young engineers as they require recognising the specific talents of each individual within their respected streams, and guiding them in that specific direction.

Vernon was awarded the 2014 Mentor of the Year award from Consulting Engineers South Africa's (CESA) AON Engineering Excellence Awards for his outstanding mentorship programmes. CESA prides people on their contribution to engineering and specifically, their commitment to sustaining and developing consulting engineering which is the key to growing the economy.

"The engineering industry has perhaps contributed to this mind-set by recognising and rewarding management roles above those of requiring specialist technical expertise. An adjustment in thinking is required," he continues.

Identifying this skills and development gap, Joubert pro-actively mentors and upskills a number of promising young professionals at GIBB, with the one-on-one devotion that mentorship provides. While there is a critical need for specialist technical skills in the industry, the need for management skills remains, he says. For some individuals there is a right time to start transitioning from a technical path into management. For others, while seniority often comes with some management responsibility, their focus should remain technical.

Taking GIBB colleagues Monique Wainstein, Associate Engineer specialising in tunnelling; and Wendy Netshikulwe, who also specialises in tunnelling under his wing, Joubert is grooming the next generation of specialists with GIBB through his thorough mentoring programme. Wainstein is being upskilled and coached for a role as a specialist leader in the tunnelling sector. Following in Joubert's footsteps, Wainstein has adapted Joubert's mentorship programme and is providing direct mentorship to Netshikulwe, who recently attended a conference on tunnelling in China through the support of Wainstein's coaching.

"Joubert has been a mentor to me for three years now, providing guidance, specifically pertaining to project management dealing with contractual issues and managing relationships both with the client and with contractor," shares Wainstein.

“Through his mentorship programme, I have been given the opportunity to manage the geotechnical team and all the associated geotechnical projects. I have ultimately gained a new ‘skills set’ which has given me greater confidence and extensive career growth,” she continues.

Netshikulwe has also benefitted greatly from her coaching with Wainstein, “Over the last five years, I credit Wainstein in helping me become the professional registered natural scientist I am today. From the site visits, to delving into the practical application of our theories; Wainstein has built my confidence and given me a chance to grow and exceed in my role.”

Site visits, practical measures and functional applications are a large part of Joubert’s mentorship as he believes in the balance of the ‘hands-on’ aspect coupled with theory for effective learning. The role of a mentor is to offer professional advice and help the employee to understand the corporate culture. Mentoring is a great way for senior employees to help the future leaders of tomorrow, and provides a way to give back to their organisation.

GIBB also runs a number of internal bursary programmes, focusing on bringing in dedicated talent and building young professionals. The Dams, Hydropower and Underground Works section of GIBB also has a number of international staff from Jordan, India, Russia; and others extending the capacity for skills transfer and upskilling of local staff.

“Leadership is a quality that is developed through experience and embracing opportunities, it is not something people are born with. Therefore, it is important that we invest in our young leaders to create lasting progression.

“We must remember that our young engineering employees of today are our future technical and business leaders of tomorrow. As mentors, we have the expertise and knowledge to help our future by training and mentoring tomorrow’s leaders, today,” concludes Joubert.

Ends.

About GIBB:

GIBB is South Africa's leading black-owned engineering consulting firm, with an impressive track record of excellence spanning more than 59 years across various sectors. GIBB's headquarters are in Johannesburg with offices located across the continent.

GIBB is uniquely positioned to support the public and private sectors in delivering on the future infrastructural requirements of South Africa. The firm's proven expertise and strong team of locally grown talent allows GIBB to confidently and consistently deliver excellence. GIBB has a growing presence in Africa, and understands local requirements by working with indigenous teams and locally based knowledge.

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