

Collaboration between fire services and industry could mean a safer South Africa

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The key concern of any fire department is to first and foremost save lives, followed closely by saving property and the environment from fire damage. The main responsibility of the fire and safety industry is to develop systems and devices that aid in preventing and treating any disaster which may cost lives and damage property or the environment. For both, it is agreed that preventing a fire or disaster before it even occurs is the most effective way to accomplish this. Yet far too many fires occur that in hindsight could have been prevented if proper measures were in place, and far too few measures are being designed with the benefit of real experience of fire.

It stands to reason then that these two fields should combine their collective knowledge and experience to determine better, more effective solutions for the prevention and treatment of fire incidents and the preservation of lives. A collaboration between fire services and the fire industry is exactly what is needed to drive the development and implementation of effective fire solutions.

There has never been a proper association between fire services and industry, a fact which hampers effective development of safety systems, measures and equipment. The Fire services with actual firefighting experience, are best positioned to advise on how actual fires develop and behave. Their knowledge also gives them insight as to what could have been used or done to prevent various incidents. They do not, however, usually have the necessary skills to develop and deliver the measures, equipment and systems that could help them accomplish this. That is where industry comes in.

Industry that develop the systems and tools that people and fire services use to improve safety and reduce fire risk, is usually doing so without having any real practical knowledge of fire behaviour. So, while they are best positioned to deliver fire and safety solutions, they lack the first-

hand knowledge to make their solutions completely effective both in preventing fire and fighting it.

Added to this disconnect are a number of concerning factors. The current South African standards for fire prevention are outdated, leading to solutions which are falling behind International standards. Local by-laws for fire prevention and safety vary from district to district, making it increasingly difficult for industry to develop solutions to address all of them. Safety and security service providers are determining fire prevention solutions with their customers without consulting local fire authorities, leading to solutions which may fall far short of the mark in terms of effectiveness. With fire prevention being more or less a grudge purchase, people invest as minimally as possible, cutting potentially lifesaving corners.

Many of these concerns are entrenched and will be difficult to change. There are rules which require amendments, and outdated practices which need to be addressed. There are many solutions available which are simply not meeting the requirements of fire services, and which could be adjusted and re-developed in order to be efficient when deployed. Similarly, there are practices used by fire services which could possibly benefit from a more technical insight.

There is a wealth of knowledge and expertise available across all sectors involved in any fire and safety related practice. Further knowledge can be gleaned from revisiting reports of past incidents and investigating what could have prevented them. If fire services and industry coupled with government and other associated role players, were to partner in assessing, amending and addressing these and the many, many other concerns they could move forward with a common goal in mind.

Collaboration between fire services and industry and all related role players would provide a holistic approach to solving fire and safety concerns, benefiting not only each other and themselves, but the country. This collaboration should be inclusive of all industry specialists, allowing them to contribute towards achieving this objective. This will ensure that South Africa pioneers the way with fire and safety planning and solutions, setting a benchmark for the rest of the world to follow.

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