

The skills shortage in the construction industry and what we need to do about it

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We don't need to be told that we live in a divided society. According to informed observers, ours is one of the most economically polarised societies in the world.



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Viewed from the perspective of someone who is on the wrong side of this economic equation, one of the serious challenges is that being economically disadvantaged also means that you probably won't have the skills to address your predicament. You are probably one of the very large number of unemployed people in our country.

The construction sector is one of the perceived opportunities to address the unemployment problem in South Africa. According the Industrial Development Corporation, 44,000 jobs were created in this sector during 2016. The question is, what kind of jobs were these and how sustainable were they?

If you compare the employment numbers of our big five construction groups, they were significantly bigger employers (in terms of numbers) prior to 1994 compared with today. A division of one of these big companies employed nearly four times the number of people in the 1980s that the entire group employs today.

This is not because the groups are smaller or do less work today than they did thirty years ago, it is because of our labour laws and their implications for employers who want to employ long-term staff and labour. This is why we have a proliferation of labour brokers.

Changes arising from employment requirements

In the construction sector, two major changes have taken place since the introduction of these employment requirements.

Firstly, skilled operations like bricklaying and shuttering are subcontracted to labour-only subcontractors. There is, therefore, little incentive for the major construction groups to make investments in training and development of people with these skills.

Secondly, unskilled people are appointed on the basis of limited duration employment contracts. Given the generally unfavourable trading situation in the construction sector in the past several years, it is very likely that the jobs that have been created (such as those reported by the IDC mentioned above), will be limited-duration employment arrangements. They do nothing to address either the real unemployment situation nor the need to upskill construction workers and improve their attraction as repeat and long-term employment candidates.

This is the situation at the bottom end of the skills food chain. As one climbs the skill ladder and skills levels improve in terms of tertiary education, there are serious deficiencies also. The truism that “you don’t know what you don’t know” applies here. The decision-makers who decide what is an appropriate and satisfactory form of qualification to satisfy the needs of industry and commerce appear not to understand what it takes to be a competent operator in the field of construction. The view appears to be that having a degree, or a college diploma is enough.

Competence in the construction sector

Those of you familiar with the work of Malcolm Gladwell’s *Outliers* will be familiar with his 10,000-hour rule - it takes this many hours to master a particular skill. We have a similar rule of thumb in the construction industry: it takes 15 years to develop a competent engineer, quantity surveyor, foreman or supervisor.

Obviously, the quality of the tertiary education is important, but it is how we help and nurture these newly qualified recruits that is crucial. Given the time required to develop the right level of competency, this is not something that can happen in a couple of years.

Compared to many other industries, the construction industry is poor at providing a structured learning and training environment to make sure that the right lessons are learned. Too many people are hard wired to doing things incorrectly and often apply bad practices as a result. We use two-day training programmes as a means of supplying specialist skills. Mentoring programmes are also provided under certain circumstances. In my view, this quick fix approach is unsatisfactory. We need more structure to ensure that we develop competent, skilled people to strengthen our local industry and who can compete on the international stage.

We therefore need a more favourable environment that should include:

- A more consistent work flow. The promised infrastructure spend must start coming into the market if we want our construction industry to survive and remain active in South Africa. This action is in government's hands.
- In addition to community upliftment facilities and minimum local employment requirements included in all government agency contracts, meaningful training requirements should also be introduced, not just for the project in question but for each trainee on a long-term basis.
- Organisations should be encouraged by tax breaks and other incentives to introduce similar training schemes as traditional apprenticeships.
- Measures should be taken to encourage young people to become tradespeople. Being a technically competent tradesperson should be promoted as a desirable career.

- We should implement opportunities to move across from being a tradesperson and acquire college diplomas and degrees to become a technician or engineer.
- Professional development of degree and diploma recipients should be more structured. This can be done in association with professional bodies
- Mentoring and mentorship programmes must be adopted and become a requirement across the board of the skills spectrum. We have a finite window of opportunity to use our “grey beard” resources to assist in the development of all skills levels. Let’s not waste it!

I believe that these minimum requirements are vital for ensuring both the well-being of our industry as well as our economy and the community at large. We have laboured too long under unfavourable circumstances and the outcome has been regression and compromise. These have damaged the industry and disappointed the candidates who pinned their hopes on opportunities that could have been created had we had a vibrant and healthy construction industry.

ABOUT IAN MASSEY

Ian Massey co-founded MDA Consulting in 2000 and is responsible for the operations of the MDA Durban office. As a director of MDA, Massey contributes towards and participates in the management and development of the firm as a whole.

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