

'Gender-inclusive workforce makes good business sense' - Morag Evans, Databuild

By  Sindy Peters

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Women make up only 11% of South Africa's total construction workforce. A staggering statistic given the industry's current critical skills shortage. And with gender-diverse companies 25% more likely to achieve above-average profitability, inclusivity just makes good business sense, according to Morag Evans, CEO of Databuild.



Morag Evans, CEO, Databuild

This Women's Month, Evans, shared with us a bit about her journey in the industry, some of the major challenges and opportunities ahead, and how we can promote the participation and advancement of women in construction.

■ ***Tell us a bit about yourself and your background?***

I joined Databuild in 1992 as a personal assistant, and steadily rose through the ranks until my appointment as chief executive officer in 2002.

Since then I have facilitated the company's evolution from a lead tracker of residential, building and civil projects to a one-stop source of intelligence for all stakeholders in the construction and allied industries.

■ ***What does a typical workday look like for you?***

My workdays are quite varied and I don't really have a 'typical day'. Much of my time is spent interacting with staff and clients. This is done mostly online as Databuild operates within a remote working model, but I do occasionally attend face-to-face meetings as well. Interestingly, online interaction has increased following the outbreak of the pandemic which has facilitated relationship building.

I also like to keep up with the latest developments and trends in the construction industry so online webinars and conferences occupy a regular spot in my calendar.

▣ ***What do you love most about working in the construction sector?***

The variety of clients we come into contact with. I particularly enjoy visiting their facilities and factories and learning more about their operations and product offerings.

There are so many different aspects to construction, but I especially love the creative side of it – that over time you get to see the end result of all the work that has gone into a specific project.

I also love the fact that the construction industry has the potential to positively impact our country's economy in so many ways, for example, the creation of jobs, skills development and reducing our carbon footprint.

The challenge lies in ensuring that we successfully harness all these opportunities.



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▣ ***What's your favourite trend in the sector right now?***

It has to be renewable energy and how it can give our embattled industry the boost it so desperately needs.

South Africa is ideally placed to harness the plentiful solar and wind energy resources at our disposal and the current energy crisis could help to fast-track the implementation of renewables-based projects.

Not only will these help to stimulate the recovery of our construction industry while adding much-needed power to our ailing energy grid, but they will also promote job creation and further economic development in the regions in which they are located.

I believe the only way forward for our country is to ramp up the implementation of renewable energy projects. It's a win-win scenario for electricity consumers, the construction industry and the country as a whole.

▣ ***As a thought leader in the construction sector, what do you see as the major challenges and opportunities ahead?***

Sadly, the sector is fraught with challenges. Government has been slow to deliver on its promises of increased spending on infrastructure development and this is severely hampering the industry's recovery.

The ongoing war in Ukraine – which is showing no signs of ending anytime soon – has also wreaked havoc on supply chains. Where previously it took weeks to procure building materials and equipment, contractors are now having to wait months for their orders to arrive. Not only are procurement and delivery costs higher as a result, but projects are being

delayed and in some instances, even cancelled, placing even more financial pressure on stakeholders and negatively impacting company reputations.

But every challenge brings an opportunity and now, more than ever before, South African contractors need to support local manufacturers and help them reclaim the production of goods and commodities that were previously imported.

Climate change presents another opportunity for South Africa's construction industry. Rather than wait for government to legislate the reduction of embodied carbon, construction companies need to lead by example and proactively work to minimise harmful practices that negatively impact the carbon footprint of buildings. This includes making smart choices around building design, the manufacture and supply of products and materials, and construction activities and processes on site.



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■ ***As a male-dominated sector, what are some of the barriers still limiting the participation and advancement of women in construction? And how do we address them?***

The fact that women comprise only 11% of the country's total construction workforce is largely driven by stereotypes which stigmatise the employment of women in the industry. This needs to change.

While it is true that a large portion of construction work is physically challenging, this does not mean that women can't or don't want to work in construction. There is so much more to the industry than the loading and unloading of heavy building materials, erecting scaffolding and removing debris from a building site. Numerous other roles exist to which women can aspire, such as procurement, project management, health and safety, surveying and estimating, to name a few.

The implementation of initiatives and programmes that educate women on all the potential career opportunities would go a long way towards boosting diversity in the sector. Construction companies should work closely with schools and tertiary education institutions to drive awareness that construction is an appealing and worthwhile career option for women. Additionally, training and mentorship programmes will help to equip women with the skill sets they need to place them on a strong career path.

■ ***Where, do you believe, does the value lie in a diverse, inclusive work environment, particularly in terms of female representation?***

The inclusion of more women in construction will help to alleviate the critical skills shortage that currently plagues the industry. Rather than 'importing' these skills from other countries we should focus on placing women in these roles.

A [report](#) published by management consulting company McKinsey & Co in 2020 reveals that gender-diverse companies are 25% more likely to achieve above-average profitability than their less diverse counterparts.

Simply put, a more gender-inclusive construction workforce makes good business sense. Men and women bring different perspectives and skills to the workplace and greater representation of women will not only substantially benefit the industry, but also drive growth in the larger economy.



'Diversity brings strength' - Tshagofatso Sibambato, civil engineer, Zutari

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■ Based on your experience, what advice would you give to women pursuing a career in construction today?

Women have fought hard to overcome gender stereotypes and achieve equality in the workplace – and rightly so – but this doesn't mean that all women want a job which is traditionally performed by a man.

Some women choose to study architecture, engineering or other professions usually associated with construction, and I firmly believe they can add great value because women contribute a different dynamic, but the truth is that some jobs are better suited to men and others to women, simply because of our differing physiological and psychological makeup.

Science has shown that women are biologically wired to nurture while men are natural providers and protectors. This doesn't mean we can't swap roles when necessity dictates it, but at the end of the day, everyone should play to their strengths.

All too often these days women are made to feel they are betraying the gender equality movement by not aspiring to a high-profile career, but if a woman chooses to be a stay-at-home mom, her choice should be respected.

“ We should be proud of our femininity and not feel compelled to imitate masculine traits. ”

I encourage all women to pursue a career in construction – if that is what their heart is telling them to do. Women can achieve as much success in the construction industry as any man, and should never let any preconceived ideas stand in their way.

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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