

Unlocking opportunities for South Africa's youth in construction

Reflecting on Youth Month and work opportunities offered by the construction industry, Jabu Serithi, projects director at GVK-Siya Zama, says the business has had to find creative ways to stay competitive in an industry that is characterised by margins that are a fraction of what they were a decade earlier.



Jabu Serithi, projects director at GVK-Siya Zama. Source: Supplied

“This impacts the opportunities that are available to the youth, with limited employment opportunities and low allocation of skills development plans as companies focus on survival strategies,” says Serithi.

South Africa’s unemployment figures increased in the first quarter of 2023, with youth unemployment continuing to grow. According to Statistics South Africa’s (Stats SA) Quarterly Labour Force Survey, almost a quarter of a million young people lost their jobs in the first three months of 2023, with nearly five million young people being jobless.

Structural unemployment, the category under which youth unemployment falls in South Africa, is caused by issues such as changes in technology, shifting demographics, or historical policy failures. There needs to be wholesale change across government and various industries to help create the necessary conditions to curb youth unemployment.

With millions of South Africans completely discouraged from looking for employment, the issue of cyclical unemployment further exacerbates the problem. Cyclical unemployment can be seen most starkly during the contraction phase of the business cycle, when the demand for goods and services falls dramatically.

Signs of a slow recovery

Despite the poor performance of the South African economy in 2020 and 2021, the building, construction, architecture and engineering sectors saw the biggest increase in hiring activity during the last quarter of 2022, according to reports.

The signs of a slow recovery in the construction industry are positive because of the sector's significant impact on the economy. "It is a well-known fact that the construction industry plays a critical role in creating an enabling business environment," Serithi says.

The industry is consistently among the top 10 largest industries in the country, employing well over 1-million people every year and contributing more than R100bn to the national GDP last year. Recent data shows that the building and construction industry experienced the biggest increase in hiring activity in the first quarter of the year.

"It is also a vital sector for the country's economy, responsible for creating jobs across many levels and stimulating investment through infrastructure improvement. That said, with the ongoing downward spiral of our economy, our industry's ability to continually absorb the impact of this decline has lessened over the years."



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Loss of expertise, institutional experience

Serithi says these effects have been notable within GVK-Siya Zama as well, with resignations as employees seek better opportunities abroad in more stable economies. "It means a loss of expertise and institutional experience and having to start from scratch and rebuild those lost skills," she says.

Despite the high levels of unemployment and slow recovery within the sector, there are positive signs that the sector could create more opportunities for young people as sustainable building methods are embraced.

Marlize Fourie, the group HR executive at GVK-Siya Zama, notes that the industry needs to raise the bar on awareness among young people, especially teenagers. "We need to find prospective construction employees when they are just beginning to conceptualise career options and choose subjects – this typically happens in grade 9 amongst the 15–16-year-old youngsters," she says.

Youth development within construction

Serithi says internships remain a key area of youth development within the sector, with GVK-Siya Zama making a considerable effort to involve young people on every project the contractor is awarded.

"We always look for opportunities to spread knowledge across the board. Opportunities are awarded to young people coming out of institutions of higher learning. They are absorbed on our projects with skills transfer and development in mind, and also as a way to plant back into our industry and ultimately our country. We find that by the end of a project, most of those young people either find themselves better opportunities or stay with us as we move onto other projects," Serithi says.

She believes the industry helps bring ideas to life. "Be it a dream home, a healthcare facility for the ill in the rural depths of Sipepetu, Eastern Cape, or a high-tech boarding school for children with special needs in Hluhluwe, our industry gives visual

representation (life) to some of the greatest ideas conceived.

“Considering the principles of the fourth industrial revolution, I believe our industry – as one of the biggest employers – provides an opportunity for humanity to still have a place as we modernise,” she says.



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Diverse opportunities on offer

In addition to leaving a legacy, the construction industry should be considered a career prospect for young people as it offers a regulated and safe environment, with diverse opportunities to build a career. Ultimately, for the construction industry to succeed, various stakeholders have to come together to ensure the ideas and solutions are implemented.

“We are nothing but the sum of the ideas we possess. If those ideas aren’t implemented and if we don’t have willing partners to implement them, nothing will change,” concludes Serithi.

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