

Covid-19 shines spotlight on health and safety in construction

By [Craig Laskey](#)

11 May 2020

Although the construction industry is known to be at the forefront of risk mitigation, as it follows very strict processes in line with stringent health and safety laws, Covid-19 has highlighted what a critical role safety, health, environment and quality (SHEQ) plays in the sector. As the old adage goes, ignore it at your peril.



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Considering how the pandemic spread like wildfire across the globe in no time at all, and the dramatic impact it has had on society, and history for that matter, the construction industry was one of many that had to respond practically overnight by putting emergency processes in place to safeguard people in the workplace. And it is now one of the forerunners of industry to be allowed back to work during level four of lockdown, albeit on a reduced scale of projects.



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Planning for the arrival of Covid-19 in South Africa

We started tracking the increase of Covid-19 cases in China during mid-January and by early February, we were monitoring the situation on a daily basis and starting to develop scenarios around the probable arrival of the pandemic in the country.

By March we had reshaped our health and safety frameworks according to guidelines taken from the World Health Organisation. It was clear that the virus was blazing a trail across the globe and we started communicating with staff, issuing protocols and implementing basic precautionary measures such as hand sanitising across our offices countrywide. We would like to believe that this early adoption of prevention protocols went a long way towards safeguarding our employees.

Communication with clients as a key stakeholder group was critical and it was through one of our clients in the educational sector that our Covid-19 plans were put forward as a template for the Construction Covid-19 Rapid Response Task Team.

This industry-led task team comprising construction sector bodies, consultants and professionals, and various suppliers to the industry has since lobbied government on a range of Covid-19 related matters, not least of which has been plans to prepare the industry for a state of readiness to return to work safely.



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Operating in a Covid-19 era

Just like any other business, the construction industry's biggest challenge is to remain operational. We directly, and indirectly, employ thousands of people who, by extension, support many more South Africans. This crisis has demanded of us to present a united front in policy matters to ensure our collective survival. Even before the virus struck, the industry was in dire straits and could barely survive another deadly blow.

As a company, the virus has brought home many valuable lessons, sparked innovation and creativity and forced us to combine government policy and strategy with lessons learnt barely weeks before in First World countries to ensure that we do everything in our power to protect our workforce.



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In addition to stringent controls handed down by central government, we have relooked so many critical aspects of our business: the transport of employees, access control at our offices and on site, medical screening and surveillance, social distancing within the workplace, decontamination and sanitising.

GVK-Siya Zama is also placing huge emphasis on employee wellness by conducting an employee survey to assess a range of factors which include emotional and financial wellbeing, leadership and communication, as well as productivity and barriers while working from home during lockdown.

While the world is still reeling from the effects of Covid-19, it has made an indelible mark on our lives forever. For a very

long time to come all efforts will be focused on health measures in the workplace, and in no small measure, it will require out of the box thinking about the way in which we work as an industry.

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