

How Millicent Mphela is pursuing equity in the heavy machinery sector

Skills development facilitator for the EIE Group Millicent Mphela is on a mission to prove that women are every bit as capable as men when it comes to male-dominated industries like the heavy machinery sector. Her role is to drive learning and development in the company and upskill people (many of them women) from disadvantaged areas through internships, graduate programmes, apprenticeships, CSI projects and social development programmes.



Millicent Mphela, skills development facilitator, EIE Group

Initially armed with a marketing qualification and harbouring dreams of working for a large communications company, Mphela's first job was something else entirely: she started working for a temporary employment services company where she gained human resources (HR) generalist skills.

"I didn't know anything about HR, but skills development kept on peeping through my window and I realised that it was where I wanted to be. I attended a course to brush-up on the various Acts and find how they could be integrated into the corporate environment. I also completed an Occupationally Directed Certificate in Education, Training and Development," she says.

Mphela joined the EIE Group in 2015, becoming the intermediary between employer and employees in determining skills requirements. "I make sure the execution of personal development is in line with the company's strategic goals. Obviously, we look at trends or what skills the business needs to reach its targets and differentiate itself from other businesses in the industry," she adds.



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A lightbulb moment

Her attraction to the heavy machinery industry began when she worked at the temporary employment services company, which contracted workers for the metal industry.

"I was fascinated by the various occupations I came across, such as pattern-makers (metal working), fitting and turning and tool and die-makers, amongst others. I wanted to know more about them and discovered the whole area of occupationally directed qualifications. It was a lightbulb moment for me. These are quite tough jobs. They need particular skills, dexterity, precision and focus, as well as an understanding of mathematics and science."

While women are in the minority in the heavy industrial machinery industry, Mphela says EIE Group has created a platform for women to enhance their skills. "One of our strategic goals has been to enlist women for our apprenticeship programmes and absorb them into the business when they qualify."

"Women are not always regarded as tough enough for this industry. This is a misguided perception. Of the 30% of women employed at EIE Group between 10% and 20% fulfil technical roles. They understand the machines, are dextrous and not

afraid to lift heavy parts or machinery. And skills development gives them incredible confidence,” adds Mphela.



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Breaking down cultural barriers

With nine years in the industry, Mphela says it hasn't always been easy to break down cultural barriers. “Obviously, this is a highly mal- dominated and unionised industry. Initially, there was a cultural barrier, especially when it came to my African male counterparts, who believed there were things I was not capable of as a woman.”

“They did not want me to address them, chair a meeting or look them in the eye. It took some time for me to build trust and create a relationship that allowed me to facilitate a deeper understanding between the employer and employees. Over the years, I have learned to listen carefully, forge strong relationships with all parties and engender trust amongst my colleagues and the management team,” she notes.



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Public multi-certification project

An advocate for occupationally directed learning, Mphela says she was excited when the Gauteng's Department of Basic Education launched the multi-certification project. “I realised it presented an excellent opportunity for young learners who did not want to pursue pure academic qualifications to find their niche in the world of work.

“The project involves encouraging schools to specialise in certain occupations that offer defined career paths. EIE Group jumped on board and adopted a technical school in Tembisa that focuses on welding, fitting and turning, and mechanical and electrical engineering. With 2,000 learners on board, we make sure the technical classrooms are well maintained and furnished with the latest equipment. We have adopted another seven schools around the country where we provide bursaries to students who are interested in engineering and technical learning.”

The learners start to gain practical exposure and MERSETA-accredited qualifications from Grade 10. Specific components of the qualification are covered between Grades 10 and 12 and by the time they leave school, learners have already met 60% of EIE Group's apprenticeship programme requirements and gained a National Qualification Framework Level 2 qualification.



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Education key to personal success

Mphela says education – in all its forms – is the key to personal success. “I believe one of my own greatest achievements is educating myself over the years. My passion to further the advancement of women also resulted in a friend and I creating a WhatsApp group called Career Hub, which is specifically aimed at empowering unemployed women.

“Every week, we share links and tips on various topics, such as how to prepare for an interview, common workplace mistakes and how to dress for the corporate world. We also post vacancies and information about learnerships and are proud that we have been able to facilitate jobs for about 40% of the women,” she adds.



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Never become complacent

She cautions that women should never become complacent in the workplace, even when they find their dream jobs. “It is important to keep developing yourself, to remain abreast of industry trends and to stay on top of your game. Always be eager to learn. Respect your colleagues at every level. It will stand you in good stead. Stay away from gossip and office politics. Lift up your hand and be prepared to go the extra mile. You won’t grow by hiding behind your computer and just doing the bare minimum. Offer to do what is requested, even if you don’t know how to do it. Then do your research and find out how to do it.”

Operations director at EIE Group Chantell Malherbe says she is inspired by Mphela’s story. “Millicent has bucked the tradition set by legacy people in the industry by backing and encouraging women development and growth in the heavy machinery sector.

“In addition to her courage, passion and persistence, she has guided and supported the business in innovating for gender equity during this time of change. There should be no gender or cultural boundaries or limitations in skills development opportunities and I concur with her that respect, continuous learning and self-development are key to remaining current and standing out in an ever-fluctuating environment,” she concludes.

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