

Co-operation between big businesses and SMEs can grow economy

The nature of the commercial property business demands that contractors, ranging from plumbers through to air-conditioning specialists, painters, electricians and others are on constant call.



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Ethel Nyembe, head of small enterprise at Standard Bank, says that major property groups literally have armies of specialists criss-crossing cities attending to calls on behalf of their clients.

"The common denominator in this sector is that great customer service is regarded as the normal standard. When your business depends on facilities being constantly available, you expect remedial work to be undertaken quickly. The answer to these needs is a responsive workforce that is highly mobile and able to reach buildings across a major city as quickly as possible. It is also something that is easier said than done," Nyembe says.

Innovative software solutions

This was examined in a recent episode of the Standard Bank-supported The Growth Engines series. It revealed just how listed company, the Broll Property Group, and its SME supplier, Asset Control, tackled and tamed the perennial challenge of client service facing the property industry, via innovative software solutions.

The Broll Property Group offers property services to occupiers and investors across 17 countries in Africa. To remain successful, the company has constantly needed to reinvent itself to meet market demands - a process that occurs every five years or so, says Malcolm Horne, Group CEO of the Broll Property Group.

"Innovation is critical in this sector. If we can't innovate, move boundaries and do things differently, we are going to stagnate. You have to be flexible, understand the opportunity, and then provide an innovative solution for it to benefit clients. We achieve this in part by embracing local talent, and bringing global practice to local talent," Horne says.

Uncertain future

The most recent process of reinvention occurred a short five years ago. Having lost its major client, Broll was facing an uncertain future.

Survival required action by the management team and diversification of income streams. The previous business model of being solely a property management company changed to a focus on diversified service streams for owners and occupiers - particularly multi-national companies.

"We had to be nimble in our service offering to clients. We designed a business that was very customer focused. We needed to understand what our clients wanted to achieve, and became focused on producing a solution around their specific requirements. This extended to our service providers too, who were critical to our operations and to the delivery of services to our clients."

Asset Control specialises in software solutions for operating large facilities and asset management. Their software is utilised by Broll to manage their business operations. Managing calls, allocating tasks and making systems like materials databases possible, it enables the management of costs and the delivery of efficiencies through direct, mobile contact with contractors and clients.

"Through the portal, Broll is able to efficiently manage its network of service providers. It allows them to receive quotes for work to be done, status updates on jobs under way, invoices for work completed, and to assist in tracking supplier payments. The system removes all manual elements from the process, making Broll unique," says John Keramianakis, MD of Asset Control.

Small contractors

Having provided the service to Broll and other major clients, the company is also eyeing new market contractors themselves.

"We realised the need to start on the ground with the 'bakkie-brigade' - these are small contractors operating from a single truck. We offer them a complementary set of tools, which includes a mobile app that they can load onto their smartphones or other portable devices, and similar software solutions that we offer to our high-end clients. This enables small contractors to receive and execute work instructions and then submit the invoice back up the line - all whilst being mobile.

"The Broll Property Group and Asset Control relationship clearly demonstrates how big businesses working with highly-specialised small businesses can be integral to growing the economy by developing solutions in niche sectors of business operations," says Nyembe.