

How building critical skills on the job in construction drives empowerment

Small businesses have been growing steadily from generating 16% of total turnover in the formal business sector in 2013 to 22% in 2019. According to Michael Pretorius, founder and managing director of CT Floors, these figures from Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) "proves that entrepreneurs and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) form the backbone of authentic empowerment and economic inclusion in South Africa".



Michael Pretorius, founder and managing director of CT Floors

Realising some 20 years ago the importance of encouraging all workers to improve their skills by on-the-job training, Pretorius says the obvious aspects to skills development and empowerment is more effective employees and better workmanship. "The real value, though, is in empowering employees to improve themselves for greater personal confidence and opportunities for promotion that bring vital financial benefits."

Of equal importance but often overlooked, says Pretorius, is succession planning. "Every successful, sustainable business must have a management team that asks the question, 'Who will step into the shoes of someone who retires or leaves?'"

Earn while you learn

A widely acknowledged fact about the construction industry is its hefty reliance on unskilled or semi-skilled labour. In the absence of certified formal training for many of the functions an industrial or construction worker must perform, CT Floors has on-the-job training that covers building, installing, knowledge and safety with tools and other crafts a worker may need a good understanding of.

"A new employee will be started in a position requiring the lowest skill," says Pretorius. "All training from there will be hands-on in order for that person to watch everything his or her colleagues do, and to learn as fast as possible."

"It is then up to that person to show the initiative and skill required to take them into the next levels. As he/she gains experience and demonstrates a willingness to take on more responsibilities, so they grow – in confidence and skill, with the ability to perform their new skills in any situation they may be required."

This obviously takes time, Pretorius notes, and follows the natural progression of this growth. "The great spin-off of it is that the initiation of young inexperienced employees into the team is a milestone that brings pride and dignity."

It's not just the physical installation part of CT Floors' operation where empowerment is encouraged, however.

"Selling high-performance floors requires technical knowledge about all aspects of the structure. There is no institution that teaches these specialised skills and it's up to us as a company to gradually build up our employees' knowledge about products and their best-fit applications."

Pretorius speaks fondly of a 19 year old who walked onto a site in 2006, asking for work. "I said he could assist me on a temporary basis. He learned quickly and by the end of the day he had made remarkable progress and I hired him."

"Today, fifteen years later, he is still with us and in charge of operations. He's taken every opportunity to upskill himself,

and managed some of our largest and most prestigious projects like the 4000m² Mercedes-Benz showroom installations in Rivonia and the Market Theatre in Johannesburg to name a few.”

SMEs and upskilling after Covid-19 losses

The global pandemic brought with it lockdown and losses, with many closures in the SME sector. Among those who weathered the storm, says Pretorius, training up the unskilled and improving existing skills among workers is vital for economic recovery.

“Employees must understand their value to the survival of any business, and management should work towards creating entrepreneurial mindsets within the company,” Pretorius asserts.

“Individuals must be able to operate successfully in different environments; identify opportunities; learn from setbacks and rebuild better. Our company motto is: ‘You win and/or you learn, but you never lose’.”

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