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SHERPA cidb EASES THE ASCENT OF CONTRACTORS
n spite of the upheavals of recent months, the cidb managed to secure a virtual meeting with Minister Patricia de Lille in July to explore the issues emanating from the National Stakeholder Forum meeting of October 2019 and sent to her office in May 2020 as a list of recommendations. The list covered issues such as revisions to the Register of Contractors, contractor development and a proposed construction ombudsman, and pinpointed the responsibilities of the various parties involved.

Generally, the Minister was supportive of the suggestions. Where we differed was on the timing for most actions, which the Minister felt was not sufficiently urgent. We are currently adjusting our timelines in preparation for further engagement.

Almost six months down the Covid-19 line, we have all pretty much become used to the invisible threat that came out of the blue to shake up our comfort zone. By all accounts, South Africans did and are continuing to do a sterling job of managing life as we now know it.

At the cidb, we implemented several measures to protect our staff, our contractors and our clients. Throughout the harsher lockdowns, we informed stakeholders about various aspects of the disease and kept them abreast of developments such as the relief fund and the implications of lockdown levels on the construction industry.

Unfortunately, even though the recovery rate is encouraging and the death rate has levelled, a great deal has to be done to recoup what has been lost to the pandemic. The coming months will demand an effort like no other to set the country back on track and to achieve the pre-Covid-19 targets we all set for ourselves.

The sorry tale of Covid-19 is well told in the cidb’s latest SME Business Conditions Survey, which shows a marked effect on building and civil construction activity in the second quarter of 2020, with many firms able to operate fully only from 1 June.

General building confidence plummeted to a new all-time low, falling to 17 from 33 in the first quarter. The greatest decline was among grades 7 and 8 (-31), followed by 5 and 6 (-17) and 3 and 4 (-9). Among grades 7 and 8, confidence is now at zero.
Provincially, the Western Cape registered the biggest drop in confidence, to 7 from 43. This was reflected in activity, which also deteriorated more noticeably than in other regions. Confidence was also lower in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, but unchanged in Gauteng.

Civil engineering confidence fared just as dismally, falling from 16 in the first quarter to 12. It was lacking particularly in grades 3 and 4 and 7, as well as 8, with business sentiment improving somewhat among grades 5 and 6.

Perhaps it is time to look beyond Covid-19 to consider trends that could lift the construction industry in the long-term. We are already seeing many, including modular construction and the influence of artificial intelligence.

For the writer of an article titled "Trends in the construction industry: Outlook in 2020", date-stamped end-July 2020, Covid-19 is no longer an issue – it was not mentioned once in the article. What was mentioned was the use of exoskeletons for construction workers, which would reduce the impact on the body of strenuous labour – with a wearer able to lift 90kg in weight as though it were 4.5kg; the increasing use of collaborative robots – or cobots – to accelerate productivity, and greater use of cost-decreasing aids such as drones.

There was also mention of redesigned protective wear such as waistcoats for women, which would eliminate the discomfort of wearing gear made to suit male bodies.

This will no doubt be music to the ears of some very special individuals celebrated in this issue of Concrete. Turn to page 4 and toast with us the newly crowned heroes of construction.
Nothing could have lifted the spirits of a recession- and Covid-fatigued construction industry more effectively and joyously than the inaugural cidb Empowerment and Recognition of Women in Construction (ERWIC) awards held at the Hilton Hotel, Johannesburg, and in sitting rooms across South Africa for armchair viewers keeping their distance.

Government and business leaders have long spoken about the importance of women in the economy and the construction industry has been known to give the nod to the tremendous work being done by bold female pioneers on the country’s building sites, but it was finally time to dispense with the talk and replace hard hats with crowns for outstanding achievement.

On 26 August, the cidb rolled out its red carpet to honour female go-getters who are showing their male compatriots what they are made of.

The event, which drew 185 entries in 10 categories – a reflection of the depth of talent out there – was a glittering tribute to those who have taken the bulldozer by the horns in choosing construction as their career niche.

Exceptional in more ways than one

‘These awards are happening in exceptional circumstances, but somehow that makes them all the more special,’ cidb CEO, Cyril Gamede, told the audience as he opened proceedings.

‘They cement the cidb’s aim to fulfil and implement an integrated strategy for the reconstruction, growth and development of the construction industry. The cidb has identified women as a critical target for development and has chosen to celebrate and encourage this group through an industry awards process.

‘Construction has traditionally been thought of as a male-dominated industry, with very few female role models. Thanks to the cidb’s continued concerted efforts to encourage women into the sector, through initiatives such as gender agenda and transformation programmes, today we celebrate the significant growth of women-owned entities and the increasing representation of women in our industry.'
'The awards recognise female-owned entities, mentors and promoters of women in construction. The enquiries and entries far exceeded our expectations. It was particularly encouraging to see interest from women across all cidb gradings.'

Ask a woman

’If you want something done, ask a woman,’ were the emphatic opening words of Minister Patricia de Lille’s keynote speech. ’Women in South Africa are capable of reaching the stars and moon. We just need to create the opportunities to make it possible for them to participate, especially in the construction industry. Women have the ability to empower other women. It is good to see that the ERWIC awards also recognise client entities and individuals who support transformation and mentorship in our industry.

’Women on job sites are no longer unfamiliar. There is progress, but it is very slow. Most of the women are on the lower cidb grades and this must change. There must be a concerted effort to take them from levels 1 and 2 to 4, 5 and right up to level 9. The stats show that we have a lot of work to do for women to become true players at the table. Within the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure, we also need to do much more to ensure that we all meet these targets together.

’But today we honour women who have overcome hurdles in this industry and become a success and a great example to others. The confidence that has brought you here today is the right step in the right direction. Sometimes as women we just need the confidence to believe in ourselves and know we are able to do it, sometimes better than men. ’You have the courage to stand tall and proclaim faith in your own abilities. You have worked hard and have valuable experience and nothing should stop you from stating your worth in society.

’As women, we must continue to push, push, push. Our achievements will not be delivered to us on a silver tray. We have to work hard, but we can achieve all of our desires in life.’

Future ambassadors

As judges, we were presented with amazing portfolios, Melita Mohlala of Kopano Creative Concepts, told the entrants. ’All participants submitted great work. We are here to reward those I would regard as the future ambassadors of construction. We are changing the landscape from being just ordinary value creators to true value capturers, and are moving from house building to terrains where even angels may fear to tread.

’You are slowly removing perceptions, doubts and the question: It’s being done by a woman – will she finish? Yes, she will finish. Just give her the support she needs. The ERWIC awards are bringing to the fore rare gems in our industry. As we rebuild our country after Covid, we need women of courage. You are here. We need women of steel. You are here. Black industrialists. You are here.’

Melita Mohlala
And the ERWIC goes to...

**PROJECT DELIVERY EXCELLENCE: GRADE 1**

... AND THE ERWIC GOES TO ...

Phindile Cindi  
PCA Trading and Projects

Phindile Cindi (centre) receives her award from cidb Board members Malebo Matolong (left) and Dr Natalie Skeepers.

Phindile started her company in 2013, with a vision of customer-centricity and high-quality service. At the end of 2019, she and her general building and civils team successfully completed an environmental upgrade project in the Johannesburg inner-city precinct for the Johannesburg Development Agency.

‘It’s really an honour for me to be standing here today to receive this award. It’s been very hard work, but finally I have received an award from the cidb. I’m so proud of myself. Keep on empowering us.’

**PROJECT DELIVERY EXCELLENCE: GRADES 2 TO 4**

... AND THE ERWIC GOES TO ...

Mikateko Mabunda  
Mikateko Trading Enterprise

Started in 2005, the company has built a reputation for high-quality housing and the professionalism of its management team, which comprises three women with a diverse range of management and technical skills. Mikateko Trading’s winning entry was the development of 86 rural houses in Molemole in Limpopo.

‘I am so happy. I just want to say thank you to the cidb. And thank you to Limpopo province for giving me the project. I delivered it well.’
... AND THE ERWIC GOES TO ...

Nokuthula Mahlangu
Elezulu Construction

Based in the Nkangala district of Mpumalanga, Elezulu was founded in 2006 by Nokuthula, a dynamic woman set on empowering other women to get ahead in construction. The company was judged on the refurbishment of water infrastructure, which it finished ahead of schedule and to the client’s complete satisfaction.

‘cidb siyabonga. It is a treat for us just to go out. Sometimes we are too busy in the construction field; we are dirty. We are used to wearing boots, but today...’ (showing off her heels with a flourish)

Thobekile Ndlovu
Thobethulani Trading and Impressing Designs

No stranger to awards, Thobekile was named top woman in construction in KwaZulu-Natal in 2015, and won the excellence in construction and black excellence awards in 2017 and 2018 respectively. She prides herself on making her clients’ dreams reality, whether construction or interior design. Her ERWIC entry was the restoration of storm-damaged rail stations in the Reunion precinct.

‘I’m a proud female contractor who has been in the business for 15 years. To climb to cidb level 9 is not child’s play. It calls for dedication, perseverance and understanding your value and your role in the value chain. This is such an honour.’
Rachel Molamu  
Mercycon

Mercycon specialises in building and renovating low-cost houses, office parks, commercial buildings and government structures. The company entered the competition on the strength of a contract to build 50 low-cost houses in Moshawa for the Department of Human Settlements. The undertaking was completed on time and to the required quality standards.

‘It’s an honour to receive this award. My team knows the stress of this project, but endurance is key. And excellence is the only way. I will never again be negative about constructing in the rural areas.’

Innocent Mpe  
Ramatsobane Developers

Since 2014, Ramatsobane Developers has hosted students from technical and further education colleges for on-the-job training, giving each group of interns a mentor to monitor progress and ensure that individuals’ needs are met. In addition, the company awards up to 40% of its projects to emerging women-owned companies with a lower cidb grading, giving them the opportunity to move up the ladder.

‘Thank you so much. When I go up, I believe in taking other women with me.’
TRANSFORMATION ENTITY OF THE YEAR

AND THE ERWIC GOES TO ...

Lebogang Zulu
Tshitshirisang Construction and Projects

Founded in 2012, Tshitshirisang provides innovative building solutions using the Fortis system and is the largest alternative building materials manufacturer in Africa. It owns AV Light Steel, a 100% black-women-owned building materials manufacturer, and has trained 21 black contractors to accelerate delivery of light steel framed and reinforced concrete buildings.

‘Wow. Nothing is more humbling than being recognised for something you love doing. Not only is my company a contractor, but it is a manufacturer of alternative building materials in an industry that knows only brick and mortar. I am the second only female in this space. Tata Madiba said it quite nicely and it’s on my boardroom wall: “It always seems impossible until it’s done”.’

YOUTH-OWNED ENTITY OF THE YEAR

AND THE ERWIC GOES TO ...

Precious Seopose
Liviya Projects

Based in Klerksdorp, North West, Liviya Projects is led by two black women who are true self-starters. Precious has project management and accounting qualifications and six years’ experience in construction administration. Her partner, Rachel Molamu, is a quantity surveyor who has worked in the built environment for nine years.

‘This is so surreal, but I was confident enough to write an acceptance speech. I want to thank the community of women around me. Seven years ago I lost my mother, but God literally brought her back to me in different women – women who inspire me, mentor me, empower me and motivate me. I am where I am because of these women. The unity of women together is a force to be reckoned with.’
Revona Botha
Robus Engineering Training Services

With more than 30 years’ experience in the built environment, Revona started making an impression at a time when a woman was a very rare sight indeed. In 1990, she was the first black woman artisan electrician. She then went from recognition of prior learning to acquire her professional registration to a master’s degree in industrial engineering. Today, she owns three companies, namely Robus, ETRCom, which is 49% youth-owned, and the intriguingly named Beach in the Bush, 100% black woman-owned.

‘It’s an amazing feeling receiving such acknowledgement and recognition, knowing it will give other women in construction courage to press on to make their mark in an industry where males are 99.9% dominant. For many years, I have wished for the cidb to create an enabling environment for women to participate effectively in the construction industry. The ERWIC awards are warmly welcomed.’

Celeste le Roux
React24

React24, a specialist facilities and construction maintenance service provider, offers bespoke services to the residential and industrial markets. It counts among its clients a number of blue-chip property companies. Celeste recently sent her administrative staff on the African Management Institute Management Programme, after which one candidate was promoted to portfolio manager. React24 is one of few companies in South Africa to employ black women plumbers.

‘I am so humbled to be in the company of the calibre of women here today. As they say in Afrikaans: “Jy moet hare op jou tande hé”, which means you must stand your ground. My heartfelt appreciation to the cidb for recognising women and their contribution to construction. This is the start of changing the narrative from the industry being male-dominated. Strong women equal strong societies. When women are supported and encouraged to fulfil their potential, they can and will change the world.’
... AND THE ERWIC GOES TO ...

Duduzile Zulu  
Qeda Contracting and Trading

Duduzile became a paraplegic when she was attacked by thugs at age 17, but she turned adversity into triumph, starting Qeda Contracting and Trading in 2006 to take advantage of opportunities in KwaZulu-Natal. The company focuses on general building, civils, renovation and maintenance for private and public sector clients.

‘It’s been a long and difficult journey for us as women, but give a woman a chance to do something and she will do it.’

WOMAN WITH DISABILITY CONTRACTOR OF THE YEAR

CHAIRMAN’S AWARD

Dr Thandi Ndlovu

Dr Thandi Ndlovu’s sister, Granny Seape, received the award from then-cidb Chairperson, Nonkululeko Sindane.

In announcing that this important award would be bestowed posthumously on Dr Thandi Ndlovu, cidb’s immediate past-Chairperson Nonkululeko Sindane confirmed that, amid all the competitors vying for the awards, who included the ERWIC winners in all categories – there was only one choice. ‘Dr T, as she was affectionately known, rose head and shoulders above everyone, even though all were impressive,’ said Nonkululeko.

‘This award has been created for an outstanding woman who contributes significantly to the development of women in construction through dedication, vision, conviction and leadership. Thandi Ndlovu was that woman.

‘Long before she started Motheo Construction Group in 1997, she had already built homes for 80 000 citizens. That is no small feat in anyone’s mind. Her passion for empowering those around her, especially young black women, has left many lives changed for the better.

‘As she gave her utmost, so she demanded the very best of everyone around her. She was a positive agent for change, a role model, a mentor par excellence; a coach. She was energy personified. No challenge was too big or too difficult. She never knew the meaning of failure. And she did it all with love and a smile.

‘Dr T’s natural leadership qualities, tenacity, insistence on excellence and innate desire to be of service make her the most outstanding and worthy winner.’
John Matthews of Master Builders South Africa, Gregory Mofokeng of the Black Business Council in the Built Environment and Aubrey Tshalata of the National Federation for the Building Industry (NAFBI) march to different drums beating out disparate mandates, but all sing a similar tune when asked for the positive spin on Covid-19.

All agree that the Covid cloud has a silver lining and all say that a woman will unlock it. That woman is Minister Patricia de Lille, who recently announced the launch of 12 special strategic projects to reignite the economy. The projects form part of the Infrastructure Investment Plan housed in the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure (see story on page 15).

'We applaud the Minister’s first step in implementing the infrastructure plan through the gazetting of strategic integrated projects in July,’ says John. ‘This should inject R106 billion into the sector.’

Gregory concurs: ‘This infrastructure-led economic stimulus package, with the requisite political will and the urgency to counter the devastating economic and employment impacts of Covid-19, offers much hope for the industry.’

Good news for contractors is that the projects are earmarked to kick off in the last few months of 2020, Aubrey points out. ‘Contractors in the lower grades can bid for packages alone or form consortia to combine capacity and capabilities,’ he says.

‘We look forward to facilitating our members’ inclusion in the process.’

**Tough times**

It has been a tough few months for those members and other construction industry players, Aubrey continues. ‘No work meant no revenue. No revenue brought labour layoffs, and the termination of short-term employment contracts and reduced salaries for permanent employees. Contractors cut overhead costs such as staff transportation and onsite accommodation, leaving workers to use public transport, which poses its own risks.’

Those on the lower rungs of the construction ladder were hardest hit, he confirms, losing access to procurement and work opportunities, which has stagnated growth and thwarted transformation, keeping contractors from moving up the cidb grades for better prospects.
Construction margins, already among the worst of any industry, have been strangled, given cost overruns on active projects, says John. ‘Significant compromises will be needed from contractors and clients to ensure that active projects are successfully completed and that both parties share an equal burden of this crisis,’ he states.

‘In the medium-term, we expect sluggish demand for construction due to depressed incomes, low consumer confidence, owner and developer uncertainty and capacity constraints.’

The journey to prosperity starts with small steps, he continues.

‘For a safe restart of site work, a contractor needs to implement health and safety protocols, train employees and ensure early detection and management of suspected infections.’

Aubrey reiterates the importance of Covid-19 management plans on construction sites covering daily screening, sanitisation, protective equipment and social distancing. ‘Fortunately, Covid-19 management costs can be included in pricing, for the client’s account,’ he adds.

Compliance is key, agrees Gregory. ‘The industry is experienced in implementing health and safety protocols. Compliance must be extended to current conditions, the costs of which should be discussed with clients so that lower-level contractors are able to continue to work profitably.’

Changing business ways

Of course, Covid-19 came into construction when it was already distressed. To be competitive, the industry needs to change the way it does business, says John, pointing out productivity improvements and innovation as the keys. ‘The pandemic has laid bare the need for alternative ways of working and this requires everyone to be receptive to new ideas, methods and the diversity in people. Companies that emerge from this crisis will be those with the agility to adapt and innovate.

‘Use of alternative building technologies, lean construction methods and innovative building technologies to optimise work processes has to be speeded up. Government departments in all three tiers also need to adapt and be proactive rather than reactive. Turnaround times are too slow.’

Gregory has already noticed changes in industry approach. ‘Administrative staff have migrated to working remotely,’ he says. ‘I think new technologies will be increasingly adopted for onsite activities where possible.’
Site meetings are no longer held on site, but through online meeting platforms, observes Aubrey. ‘Tender briefings are also being held online and tenders submitted digitally.’

Aubrey has high hopes for digital solutions. ‘South Africa can do much more with building information modelling and drones, for example,’ he stresses.

The measures proposed in the hastily convened Construction Covid-19 Rapid Response Task Team’s lobby to government to reopen the industry during lockdown will probably become the norm going forward, Gregory says. These measures include shift reorganisation to contain the number of workers onsite without sacrificing production levels.

To these recommendations, John adds collaboration to resolve project delays and cost overruns and revisiting scope to factor in lower productivity. Supply chain resilience will also be a factor, with possible sourcing sought from different suppliers. And a review of foreign content requirements is needed, given the closed borders and high exchange rate.

Catalyst for smarter approaches

Covid-19 will prove to be the catalyst for smarter and safer ways of conducting business, Aubrey maintains. ‘These will not only increase project delivery efficiency, but bring an economy-boosting spinoff in the creation of employment opportunities in areas such as information technology and business development.’

John’s hope for the longterm is that acceleration of government spending on infrastructure, public building and maintenance lives up to its promise.

‘We have impressed on the Minister and on Dr Kgositjengso Ramokgopa, in his capacity as head of infrastructure and investment in the Presidency, the need for urgency in getting these projects to tender, so that we can salvage jobs and protect incomes,’ he concludes.
With the unemployment rate at 30.1%, South Africa appears to need all the plans it can muster to coax the economy off life support and back onto the global main arterial. Or maybe it just needs one super plan; a plan on steroids.

The Infrastructure Investment Plan, launched in a new guise in May 2020, may just be that plan. As it has undergone a remodelling and refocusing in the wake of Covid-19, Minister Patricia de Lille, the plan’s custodian in her capacity as head of the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure (DPWI), believes it is.

Reporting recently on how the plan came together, Dr Kgosientso Ramokgopa, Head of the Infrastructure and Investment Office in the Presidency, reiterated that it was conceptualised to revitalise the economy and reduce rampant unemployment, which were exacerbated by Covid-19 and the downgrading of the country.

The construction industry, he stated, has contracted by 14.2%, resulting in significant job losses. The country is currently far from achieving its National Development Plan (NDP) target for public sector infrastructure due to underspending across all spheres of government and state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and reduced state implementation capacity.

‘It’s all about recovery and jobs and reuniting the country around a set of easily understood goals in the spirit of the NDP,’ said Minister de Lille in her address to the leading lights at the recent cidb Empowerment and Recognition of Women in Construction awards. ‘It has become essential for all to address the systemic issues in the built environment, including transformation, job creation, corruption and social facilitation.’

The new plan is touted as the antidote to problems in these areas. ‘We have been accused of perpetual planning, but not following through, so we are doing things differently this time,’ the Minister stated.

So what exactly is different?

Most notable is a new methodology, the Sustainable Infrastructure Development System (SIDS), of which President Ramaphosa says: ‘We are institutionalising the SIDS methodology as a new way of packaging and preparing projects for funding. This methodology will determine three pathways for project funding, namely commercial funding, blended financing and fiscal allocation.’
At a recent briefing of the Portfolio Committee on Public Works and Infrastructure, Dr Ramokgopa explained that infrastructure development has always been undertaken in a transactional manner, but that the new approach examines the extent to which a project advances the strategic interests of the country and assesses the project on jobs creation potential, infrastructure value chain, sourcing of materials and broadening of the market.

‘There is an urgent need for a credible pipeline of bankable projects,’ said Minister de Lille. ‘We asked all tiers of government and SOEs what projects they have and we ended up with a list of 276, with a value of more than R2.3 trillion. We put all of these through the new methodology and came up with 55 bankable programmes that were gazetted on 24 July.

‘These projects all qualify to be prioritised and fast-tracked and will be implemented over one financial year.’

The Minister cited some of her biggest hits on the list:
- The urban management programme to clean cities and townships and create thousands of jobs.
- Digitisation of government facilities, such as clinics, an area where the country is ‘light years behind,’ she says.
- Equipping of all government buildings with photovoltaic and water saving technologies.
- Student accommodation.
- Construction of five government department head offices in Pretoria at a cost of about R9 billion, which will create at least 75 000 jobs.

Social facilitation is an integral part of the new process, she added. ‘We can have all plans we want, but we have to involve the beneficiaries. The communities affected must own these projects.’

Skills development also figures strongly in the mix, particularly for the historically disadvantaged, the youth and those with disabilities.

Here, the Minister explained, DPWI, with the cidb and others, is developing a database of existing skills in the country, including unemployed and retired professionals. ‘We have the skills we need, but we don’t recognise them,’ she stressed. ‘We will use this database on the projects, bringing in also interns and the recently qualified. We will use what we have and stop hiding behind lack of skills and capacity, which has become an excuse for inefficiency.’

By analysing cost, benefits and financial viability though what the Minister prefers to call the ‘now’ – rather than the new – infrastructure project pipeline, it is hoped that waste incurred in the past can be avoided in future. ‘I have a list of projects that are unfinished, in spite of the money being gone,’ she lamented. ‘We all need to work together to revive the construction industry.’

By doing so, we will, says President Ramaphosa, ‘help propel our economic recovery effort and bring hope to the country’.
In the bid to have the construction industry reopened in spite of the lockdown, no organisation was more vocal than the South African Forum of Civil Engineering Contractors (SAFCEC). In its relentless lobbying of government, it brought with it an innovation that challenged perceptions of construction as conservative and slow to react. Its promise was simple: to keep government, relevant bodies and industry well-informed of Covid-19 developments and trends.

ConstructionSector.Online went live at the beginning of May and it was easy to visualise a virtual queue forming, as stakeholders immediately lined up to take advantage of the free-to-use, mobile-friendly reporting and monitoring tool that assists role-players to keep track of the virus’s journey across construction sites.

In less than a week, 40 construction companies had registered 174 projects, valued at more than R17 billion. At that time, SAFCEC Chief Executive Officer, Webster Mfebe says, just fewer than 5 000 individuals had been screened, with suspected cases totalling 19. ‘One Gauteng contractor reported 18 confirmed positive cases and was immediately contacted by our health and safety advisory services, which provided assistance in risk mitigation. The contractor’s remaining 27 employees were immediately advised to self-quarantine for 14 days.’

After an amazing initial response, interest only grew and, currently, 107 companies managing 500 projects valued at more than R41 billion are using the service. ‘Not only is the tool definitively demonstrating the impact of the construction industry on the country’s economy, but it also disseminates real-time information and engages the entire sector,’ says Webster.

This tool was designed and developed in-house by SAFCEC, with a four-pronged purpose, he explains.

‘Firstly, we wanted to demonstrate the construction sector’s ability to operate safely during lockdown, and to monitor sub-sectors of construction that may be at higher risk than others, thereby creating the ability to review certain project types should the need arise – as opposed to shutting down the entire industry.

‘We also set out to help contractors to monitor compliance and standards, to commit to being transparent and ethical in disclosing information, rather than hiding the true state of Covid-19 infections, and to establish best practice in the management of the pandemic that could be emulated by other sectors.’
Using the tool is a cinch, demanding little more than a modicum of administrative commitment, Webster adds. Contractors complete a daily report for each project, detailing project type, nature of work, demographics, geographic details and employee screening stats. This is done on a mobile or desktop device, providing through a click or two crucial information to assist the government to monitor Covid-19 compliance, track its prevalence or spread across the country, and determining areas or projects at greater risk than others, thereby allowing for interventions where necessary.

When Covid-19 is just a bad memory, ConstructionSector. Online will remain as a testament to the ability of the industry to pull together in times of adversity and engage in real conversations about real situations.

‘With this tool, we have built a community on common ground that enables us to address needs and concerns directly and to take action,’ Webster states. ‘It has standardised practices in employee management relating to Covid-19, which bodes well for the future of the industry to engage. Importantly, it has caught the attention of state-owned enterprises, the construction industry’s clients, which have expressed interest in the future management of their relationships with principal and sub-contractors on projects.’

‘Above all, it is confirmation that construction not only has the ability and creativity to respond quickly to changing operating environments, but that it is increasingly recognising the value of innovation in all areas of business.’
The world was not ready for what 2020 served up. That is evident in some of the outlandish behaviour and utterances that followed the unwanted arrival of Covid-19, from mad mall dashes across the globe to stockpile toilet rolls to French president Emmanuel Macron’s jaunts, strolls and handshakes as the virus spread through his country and Donald Trump’s assertion that the US reaching the world’s highest rate of confirmed infections was a ‘badge of honour’.

Bizarreness aside, Covid-19 certainly provided a departure from the humdrum for the research community.

Among those at the forefront locally was the Department of Quantity Surveying and Construction Management of the University of Johannesburg, the latest recipient of cidb Centre of Excellence status for its potential to enhance professional, academic and research capability to support industry development. The centre joined hands – remotely of course – with more than 800 contractors to assess the impact of the pandemic on the South African construction industry.

Already under more pressure than a foundation pummelled relentlessly by a jumping jack, construction could well have done without Covid-19. But gaining an understanding of the dynamics at play puts the industry in a stronger position to deal as effectively as possible with the intrusion, says the cidb’s Director: Research and Development, Dr Ntebo Ngozwana.

The study, which took place during lockdown level 5, noted that construction was on the backfoot already, being ‘hands on’, labour intensive and known for its slow adoption of technologies. The lockdown protocol was completely counterintuitive.

The major concerns among contractors, the study divulged, were supplier deliveries, followed by the effect on staff, staff’s presence at job sites and the implications for key project partners.

Staff rotation onsite would be the best approach to reopening construction sites and firms, most respondents agreed.

More than 70% of those surveyed believed that the outbreak would have a severely negative impact on their revenue. Most foresaw the postponement of their jobs in 2020, with an optimistic minority predicting only short delays.

Most organisations indicated that, if they were unable to recover from the loss of jobs or to secure new jobs, they would have to lay off workers. Only a few saw restructure of wages and deferred payments as alternatives until new work was acquired.
Impacts most feared

The top three short-term impacts of the pandemic for grades 2 to 6 were job losses for construction workers, loss of income/revenue for organisations and retrenchment of workers. With job losses and retrenchment, grades 6 and 7 also mentioned non-payment of preliminary and general costs during the lockdown, and Grade 9 companies were worried about lack of payment for certified work.

Interestingly, respondents from all grades considered poor communication (inability to meet) and non-availability of construction materials as the least significant short-term impacts.

In the medium-term, grades 2 to 6 were most concerned with potential bankruptcy and the country’s economic decline, with the lower grades including drop in profits. Grades 7 and 8 mentioned this too, along with economic decline and reduced investment by the private sector due to low investor confidence. Grade 9 respondents identified loss of revenue for organisations, inability to pay staff and job losses as the most significant medium-term impacts.

Massive job losses for construction workers and bankruptcy of construction firms were considered significant long-term issues by grades 2 to 6, while grades 7 and 8 contractors cited in addition to bankruptcy an increase in the number of contractual scheduling claims, with mediations, arbitrations and litigation over construction delays. For those in Grade 9, bankruptcy and significant job losses ranked alongside suspension of projects and potential site closure.

Surviving Covid-19

To survive Covid-19, the construction industry would need significant support, the respondents stressed, including fast-tracking of payment to contractors and increased government spending on infrastructure delivery. State support through tax benefits, accelerated tender approval and award, reimbursement of outstanding invoices from stalled projects, support from financial institutions and Unemployment Insurance Fund effectiveness would go a long way in helping the industry regain stability.

The research team concluded that contractors that will survive will be those flexible in their activities and willing to put in place measures to minimise the potential impact of Covid-19, says Ntebo.

‘The study will help construction organisation owners to understand what is required of them to stay afloat in this unsettling period,’ she concludes. ‘It is also a guide for the government and professional industry bodies to assist the industry by responding to the needs expressed by participating contractors.’

The study will be available on the cidb website in due course.
‘Climbing to the top demands strength, whether it is to the top of Mount Everest or to the top of your career,’ said former Indian president, APJ Abdul Kalam.

While there is undoubtedly more oxygen available to those climbing from one cidb grade to the next, the support and encouragement that gets people to the summit of the world’s highest mountain are equally important for the contractor on his or her way up.

It’s this type of support that the cidb offers to those undergoing contractor development programmes (CDPs) with client companies so that they emerge on a stronger career footing. Through capacity-building workshops, it fills in any gaps in expertise revealed during the baselining or assessment of contractors on CDPs.

To graduate from a CDP, contractors must exit one cidb grade higher than when they entered and meet the requirements for the cidb Competence Standard for Contractors, explains the cidb’s Skills Specialist: Procurement and Development, Pranveer Harriparsadh. ‘The Standard enables state entities to manage risk on complex contracting strategies and to promote contractor development,’ he says. ‘It also increases and makes it easier to manage the effectiveness of development interventions.

‘It specifies minimum competencies required to run and manage a sustainable contracting enterprise at different cidb grading levels and provides for assessment of these competences using a guided interview schedule pegged on equivalent qualifications on the National Qualification Framework. We call this an assessment of prior learning and it is during this stage that voids in knowledge are identified that require top-up training such as that provided in our workshops.’

Two workshops were held before Covid-19 put a temporary spanner in the works: one in Limpopo in February and the second in Bloemfontein in March, which hosted 15 contractors.

As the sessions were to be interactive and tackle real-life problems, contractors were asked to raise challenges they had faced, from legislation and tender preparation to technical and business planning, financial management, and environment, safety and health considerations.

‘Contractors then discussed under the guidance of a facilitator how they overcame these challenges and, more importantly, how they would avoid similar situations in future, especially in areas such as understanding contractual documents,’ Pranveer elaborates.
The response to the workshops was extremely positive, he adds. ‘Listening to other contractors’ experiences gives great insight into problem resolution and into the consequences of not addressing issues timeously. The workshops certainly reinforce the growing need to provide some sort of advisory service to contractors.’

Under the current Covid-19 occupation, future sessions will be an online affair for which planning is well underway, says the cidb’s Manager: Enterprise Development, German Mphahlele. ‘We are looking at developing online training modules that allow contractors to work at their own pace, which will be followed by online interactive sessions.’

Everyone has his or her own Everest to climb, said late mountaineer, Wanda Rutkiewicz. With the cidb’s help, CDP candidates will find the ascent that much easier; even if the journey is virtual for the time being.

For those who have already benefitted from a CDP workshop, it’s onward and upward to their professional peak.