

MD calls for removal of barriers to entry into engineering for women

As South Africa cries out for a larger pool of engineering skills, the sector needs to ensure that there are no barriers to the entry of women into professional careers that contribute to the engineering environment, according to SRK Consulting's MD, Peter Labrum.



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While the number of women in consulting engineering has certainly grown, Labrum said that this growth has been mainly in the sciences - such as environmental science, geology, hydrology and related disciplines rather than in civil, mining or electrical engineering, for instance.

"In the consulting field, there has always been many more women in the sciences than in engineering per se," said Labrum, "but there is also a definite increase in the number of women studying engineering. And, of course, many of the scientists will work in an engineering environment."

Need to attract young people

He emphasised the need for the profession to attract young people who were passionate about the field, irrespective of gender, who really wanted to work as engineers.

"Just as there should be no barriers or discrimination against anyone, I would also caution against applying any artificial incentives for people to enter this line of work," he said. "The danger is that by 'pushing' individuals into certain careers, you could get the wrong sort of person."

Said Labrum: "In a profession like engineering, you really need the right people. If you want the best engineers you must have people who genuinely want to be engineers, who are passionate about it."

He said this was how SRK earned its reputation. "Our business is really based on meritocracy - we want to just have the best people. That's how we've been so successful. Whether the best person is male or female is irrelevant. Their progression through the company is based on their value to the business," he said.

"The reason that more women are graduating as engineers is that they see this as something they want to do; nowadays, there is less discrimination in the workplace generally, and that makes it easier for women to consider these options."

SRK's complement of women employees in professional posts in its South African offices now exceeds 90 experts, including mining engineers, civil engineers, chemical engineers, rock engineers, engineering geologists, hydrogeologists and environmental scientists. Women also play key roles in the firm's fast-growing discipline of stakeholder consultation and public participation - an element of mining and other industrial projects that is becoming recognised as a foundation to sustainable development.

"Many of the roles at the level of principal - which usually requires 12 to 15 years of experience - are occupied by women in SRK today, from which they can move into the managerial levels of associate and then partner," said Labrum.

Women in SRK's executive management team include hydrogeologist Diana Duthe, and environmental scientist Briony Liber - both principal consultants and partners in the firm. Vassie Maharaj, who specialises in stakeholder engagement, and Manda Hinsch a water specialist, are both associate partners, as are environmental scientist Dr Laetitia Coetser and Sandy McDonald who is responsible for the GIS section in the company.

Positive dynamic

Labrum said that there was no denying the positive dynamic that women introduced to any organisation, while many still take the primary responsibility for managing their families. "This adds a new dimension to the definition of success in the workplace, as women balance their professional responsibilities with their family responsibilities," he said.

He recalled a time when engineering was not well paid when compared to the fields of commerce, medicine or law, and suggested this was also a factor in the decisions of many young people choosing the direction of their university studies. "Today, the better remuneration does tend to attract more young people - including women," he said.