

Motor vehicle accidents cost construction sector R352m

According to a [2018 report](#) from the World Health Organization on road safety, South Africa has one of the worst overall motor vehicle accident (MVA) rates in the world, with around 1 million accidents per year and 31.9% fatalities per 100,000 people.



Image source: [Arrive Alive](#)

Deon Bester, occupational health and safety manager at Master Builders Association Western Cape (MBAWC), says that according to Federated Employers Mutual Assurance Company (FEM) - the workmen's compensation insurer for the building industry - 929 of these accidents per year involved people working within the construction industry. "While this may seem low, the cost per accident is detrimental," says Bester.

"FEM's latest statistics show that the total number of vehicle crashes in the construction industry amounted to 4,602 from January 2015 to December 2019, which cost a whopping R351,945,735.00 with 66,883 workdays lost," he adds.

FEM's Safetember

In order to address health and safety issues, FEM started a campaign several years ago called 'Safetember' which was targeted at reducing the high number of accidents with the focus of the first campaign being on motor vehicle accidents (MVAs) in the construction industry. "The campaign was aimed at making policyholders more aware of the current situation and sought to find ways to address the problem. This campaign now encapsulates all the health and safety issues related to construction, including the MVAs which account for around 10% of all injuries related to construction work," said Bester.

He points out that an industry that is currently experiencing one of its worst downturns, with limited work available, can ill afford to spend almost R352m on accidents that are avoidable, according to the statistics provided by FEM. "The cost of implementing measures to mitigate these accidents are negligible compared to the cost of these accidents - even before taking into account the loss of life. In many instances, the person who loses his or her life is the main breadwinner in a home."

SA legislation

These numbers are quite high considering the type of legislation South Africa has in place, both governing the use of public roads and the Construction Regulations of 2014, says Bester. "The allowable method of the transportation of workers in the back of a goods vehicle ('bakkie') is very clearly described in the legislation and, as such, enforcement of this legislation

remains one of the fundamental issues.”

This legislation essentially means that you are not allowed to carry people in a goods vehicle such as a bakkie or truck unless there is a barrier high and strong enough to prevent them from falling out during an accident. If seated, the barrier must be at least 350mm and if standing it must be at least 900mm high. Any tools or goods must be carried in such a way that they cannot fly around and injure the passengers during an accident.

Role of law enforcement

“My own experience while travelling on our major highways is that it is rare to see one of these vehicles that fail to meet the safety guidelines being pulled off the road by law enforcement officials,” adds Bester. “It is my contention that there needs to be a specialised licensing procedure for anyone who transports employees in the load bay of a bakkie. This would go far to make the drivers aware of the dangers they pose to the persons seated on these vehicles and should help reduce the high number of accidents currently experienced in the industry.”

Contractors have no, or very little, control over what happens on the highways and Bester believes that they are relying on the traffic law enforcement officers to police the vehicles being used to transport workers. He goes on further to say that it is important to understand that transporting employees on open vehicles is and will always be part of the industry in South Africa.

Causes of accidents

Current information shows that the main causes of accidents in the construction industry are due to speeding, drivers not taking into consideration the load on the vehicle, overloading of vehicles, unroadworthy vehicles and incompetent drivers.

Bester concludes by saying, “We need to accept that the status quo will not change in the foreseeable future, employees will continue to be transported on open vehicles, it is how we manage it into the future that will determine our success in reducing motor vehicle accidents.”

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