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MINING INDUSTRY INSIGHT

1350 words

Commemorating Executive Director Nico Pienaar's 20 years with ASPASA

In saluting his two decades at Aspasa, we also took the opportunity of interviewing Nico and sharing some of his industry insights.

20 years spent with a single company shows a level of commitment uncommon across industries these days. Unlike previous generations, it's become generally accepted that today's workers move between roles, companies, even career fields, more regularly than ever before.

But there are still those who stay with a particular organization, pursuing their craft and passion with dogged persistence, and without constantly wondering just how green the grass might be elsewhere.

One such person is surface mining association, Aspasa's executive director, Nico Pienaar. With the arrival of the 1st of January 2019, Nico would have given 20 years of uninterrupted service to The Association.

Long haul

Over the past 20 years, Nico has left an indelible mark on his industry. Not only has he been instrumental in introducing and developing safer, more environment-friendly practises, he's also played a pivotal role in ensuring that all industry members have a level playing field. Of equal relevance to Nico's legacy have been his efforts to help companies maintain profitability, no matter the political or economical climate.

For those not that familiar with Aspasa, it's an industry association representing those companies in the surface mining and quarrying industries and crushing operations. Aspasa also functions entirely independent, even though it's a member of South Africa's Chamber of Mines. Prior to taking over Aspasa's main duties from Sir Rupert Bromley in 1999, Nico worked at a law firm, an

insurance company, a bank, a credit company, a trade union, in the building industry, mining industry, and for various other corporate groups and associations. His introduction to Aspasa therefore came with a rather unique knowledge and skill set, which Nico optimised over his 20-year tenure.

He has a B-Tech in HR and Training, an advanced diploma in Labour Law, and an M.Phil in Labour Law and Industrial Relations. He further completed various other diplomas and advanced diplomas in Industrial Relations, Human Resources and Training.

Aspasa highlights

As a young man Nico had a special interest in the law, even starting his career as an Article Clerk at a law firm. But it soon became clear that this wasn't his calling. "I quickly realised that I didn't have the make-up to defend people who admitted they're guilty. Accepting the fact that being a lawyer was not for me came as bit of a shock."

But Nico's love for the law didn't diminish, and he soon discovered the fields of Industrial Relations and Labour Law (branches that were still underdeveloped at the time). And eventually he did go on to obtain his Masters, specialising in Labour Law/Industrial Relations. After his move to Gauteng, where he worked for various companies, as well as Santam Bank, and the Estate Agents Board, he joined BIFSA where he was quickly promoted. He eventually became BIFSA's first Industrial Relations Advisor.

Then came Cullinan Holdings in Olifantsfontein, where he was appointed as the Group's Industrial Relations Advisor. Later he became the Group's Training Manager. At the time, Cullinan was huge, overseeing many companies and about 9 trade unions. This was also when Nico was asked to manage a trade union – The Building Society Staff Association, which later became SASBO. For Nico, this was probably his most edifying career move.

Trade unions

"I simply enjoyed being the union's General Secretary; even though back then unionists were frowned upon because they were seen as communists (this was still the old SA). Being a white South African and having an Afrikaans surname further lifted eyebrows."

Nico also has Cobra Tech to add to his extensive portfolio, which is one of our largest engineering companies. At the time of Nico's joining, Cobra Tech had many problems with labour relations. When he made the move to Aspasa, the Association was still in its infancy. One of his main areas of focus at the time was the health and safety and environmental audits, which he says were "rather watered down".

"After Sir Rupert's retirement we expanded the Health & Safety Audit Programme, eventually developing it into one of the best globally." But the industry also had its own set of challenges. According to Nico, as time went by morale changed.

Different times

“People saw each other as threats; companies bought out smaller players. There was also suspicion about how some people got into senior positions, only to get things all wrong. This damaged the potential and success of a few companies. The attitude of nail-your-co-worker also ran rife.”

“A big problem was the fact that many were poor leaders, and if one had to do a study on their companies and individuals, it would be very interesting to assess how they got it so wrong. Today one can see the companies struggling and the staff’s morale being very low.”

For Nico, and being in the position he’s in, it’s very interesting to have such an expansive view of the big picture. “When in a company, one doesn’t see the problems. Yes, I’ve been part of these companies; but when dealing with the employees as an industrial relations specialist, only then does one see all the challenges. It’s also a tricky position to be in. If you dare raise issues, then all of a sudden you’re not a team player.”

New challenges

For Nico, our biggest challenge is the level of corruption that hampers the regulatory body, combined with the general misuse of power across sectors and industries.

“This year alone two of the regional offices of our main regulatory body, the Department of Mineral Resources (DMR) had to be closed for various reasons, one being corruption. Some of the other issues include issuing mining licenses to influential people, taking bribes, or only visiting established operations.”

“It’s a sad reality, but a few officials from the Regulator are misusing their powers to close operations. They also make a point of focusing on specific companies, and often the reasons are not clear. At the end of the day, industries across sectors suffer as a result – government affiliated or not.”

“For instance, the DMR often turns a blind eye to illegal operations. This happens whilst they showcase a whole department dealing with illegal mining – if one audits its effectiveness you’re bound to be shocked. There’s further no proof that any operations identified as illegal are closed down or prosecuted by them.”

There is hope

“With the appointment of the new minister of the DMR, Mr Mantashe, there has been a general clean-up – even the previous Chief Inspector is now back. This is helping a lot; not only is he highly professional, he’s also fair. And things are starting to filter down. Already many dishonest people have been sacked, whilst industry has been requested to report those officials who engage in corrupt activities.”

“Over the last few months, there has also been a remarkably positive change in attitude from all parties. Indeed, our current economic status is affecting all players, but as an industry we need to

keep working together, whilst improving our service offerings and cementing our commitment to organizational bottom lines. The future certainly does look promising, and more so as we keep ridding ourselves of the aftershocks from the Zuma era.”

“Personally, it’s been a long journey that wasn’t always planned or foreseen. Although the learning curve has been rather steep at times, the last 20 years has been an enjoyable adventure in which I’ve met some inspiring people I proudly call my industry colleagues.”

“For Aspasa, there still lies a long road ahead, as we keep striving to add value to industry. Again, the future looks very promising; we just need to get through the present economic hurdle.”

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Caption

Nico Pienaar of Aspasa

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