

## **The importance of Practical training**

As a BSc Construction Studies student at the University of Cape Town, it is a requirement that we, the students, actively engage with the built environment. We are tasked by the university to do this through practical work experience in the construction industry. One would assume that the challenge comes with carrying out tasks in the workplace, however, the tricky part of it all is actually finding the work. This is due to the fact that construction companies are not always willing to let inexperienced individuals onto their sites. They run the risk of injuries or fatalities on site when they allow unskilled workers or visitors onto site. Luckily, I have been very fortunate when it comes to finding work opportunities due to the networking skills I have learnt over my years as a University of Cape Town student. I quickly learnt that the trick is to work for the experience and not always for the pay. The experience gained through practical training is immeasurable as you gain a really good understanding of what it means to work within the built environment sector. This experience is something that cannot gain through book knowledge from lectures. It is necessary to put the knowledge gained in class into practice at work in order to reaffirm it and really cement it.

## **My Second Year Practical Training Experience**

In my second year of study as a BSc Construction Studies Student, I got the opportunity to gain my practical training experience with two different firms, each of which offered me unique experiences within the construction industry. The first being the Kwa Zulu Natal Department of Health Infrastructure Unit which is a government entity. The second firm that I worked at was Ojama Development Projects which is a main contracting firm. Through these contrasting companies, I was afforded the opportunity to broaden my knowledge on the construction Industry.

## **Kwa Zulu Natal Department of Health Infrastructure Unit vs Ojama Development Projects**

Through working with The Kwa Zulu Natal Department of Health Infrastructure Unit, I was able to get a clearer idea of the quantity surveyor aspect of the built environment. Through working with Ojama Development Projects, I was able to get good insight on the Construction Manager side of the industry. The contrast between the two ends of the spectrum really affirmed my love and passion for the built environment and motivated me to continue working hard towards reaching my career goals in the construction industry. I believe it was very necessary for me to explore in both the Construction Management and Quantity Surveyor fields as a BSc Construction Studies Student. The reason I believe so is because at the end of my degree, I have the option of continuing my studies and getting my honours in either Quantity Surveying or an honours degree in Construction Management. Being well versed in both the career paths will allow me to make a better informed decision on what to study when I reach honours level instead of blindly walking into the wrong field.

## **Kwa Zulu Natal Department of Health Infrastructure Unit**

I had the privilege of working with the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Department of Health Infrastructure Unit for my practical training for the first two weeks of my June/July vac period. This experience provided me with immeasurable insights into the role of a quantity surveyor within the construction industry. This experience was in the context of a quantity surveyor particularly in the public health sector. The Kwa-Zulu Natal Department of Health Infrastructure Unit specialises in the renovation, planning, design, maintaining, and production (construction) of public health facilities within the Kwa Zulu Natal region. Such facilities include, but are not limited to, public hospitals, clinics, mental institutions, and accommodation for public healthcare workers. The main objective with all the projects of the infrastructure unit is to produce competent infrastructure in order to afford the South African government the ability to use the infrastructure to provide its citizens with good health care. The infrastructure unit consists of professionals across various disciplines in the construction industry. I worked very closely with the quantity surveyors, however, there were also

civil engineers, architects, and construction managers. My time with the department of Health was a very exciting one for me and was by far the most unique out of all my practical training work experiences. The reason for this is because I got the opportunity to actually see the office work associated with the built environment. I got to compare and contrast the differences between the site work and the conventional nine to five employment. Although being stuck in an office all day does get rather mundane, the occupation of a Quantity Surveyor means they get to travel and leave the office from time to time to conduct measurements on site. This provides the perfect balance between site work and office work which is an aspect of the job that really does appeal to me. Working closely with individuals such as Mr P, Chief Quantity Surveyor, and Nonku Dlamini, quantity surveyor, really allowed me to push myself. Nonku was always willing to answer any questions I had and guide me through tasks whereas Mr P always made sure to task me with things I had never done before in order to learn and fully immerse myself in the experience. I am grateful for my time spent with them. During my time there, I went on multiple site visits to different hospitals, clinics, and health care staff accommodations across the province. Each visit was different as different things needed to be addressed, however, the main cause behind all these facilities needing renovation and maintenance was because of the flood that happened earlier in the year all across Kwa Zulu Natal. Whilst training at the Kwa-Zulu Natal Department of Health Infrastructure Unit, I got to see first hand how all the built environment professionals with different skillsets come together to deliver a project. I also got to see where exactly I would fit into a project if I were to assume the role of a quantity surveyor.

### **Ojama Development Projects**

During my time with Ojama, I was at a site where renovations were taking place. A nurse accommodation next to a hospital in Pietermaritzburg was in need of renovations and Ojama was the contractor that won the tender for the project. The project client was the KZN Department of Health, it was through them that I managed to get Ojama contacts. Ojama was working on a project on a hospital in Pietermaritzburg. Ojama was the main contract for this project and the KwaZulu Natal Department of Health infrastructure Unit was the client for the project. I was initially working with the client, KZN Department of Health infrastructure unit, and through them I was able to work on site with the main contractor. The hospital had nurse accommodation that was being renovated due to poor living conditions. The accommodation is on the same plot as the hospital but is secluded from the actual hospital. This means that the renovation did not affect the hospital at all. During my time there I managed to touch base with many categories that show on the typical organogram of a main contractor. I worked with the site agent, the QS on site, the foremen, the health and safety officers, the storeroom clerk as well as the electrical subcontractor. Exposure to each of these roles really opened my eyes up to the different responsibilities that are divided amongst a team within a construction project. With the site agent, Musa Mseleku, I sat in and typed up minutes for all his meetings. By doing so I was exposed to the different people that he must report back to. Such meetings were held with the client, meetings with the subcontractors and meetings with the principal agent. Musa explained the nature of the project, the companies working within the project as well as his role upon my arrival on site. Shadowing him gave me a brief idea of what to expect going forward. With the foreman, Kwazikwakhe Qwabe, I did a daily site walk-about. With the first site walk about, she explained in detail what the progress was on each of the seven floors. Through her I was caught up with the site activities. At this point, the project was still on stripping with some floors and was on paintwork for other floors. The stripping was on the windows. This was a very tedious process as it was an activity that had to be carried out in such a way whereby there were minimal injuries due to broken glass. Kwazikwakhe also introduced me to the other staff on site that I would be working closely with. The storeroom clerk, Thobile, was very friendly and welcoming. She was more than willing to answer any questions I had. She took me through the storeroom where they keep tools and she taught me the name of

every single tool used on site. Her and Kwazikwakhe, the foreman, then tested my knowledge on the tools. This was rather exciting to me because I got to properly see how capable I am of grasping knowledge on site. The health and safety officers took me through the site and taught me what to look out for with regards to safety. They made sure to respectfully keep the workers on site aware of the possible dangers. During my time with the health and safety officers, I sat in a few of the subcontractors audits. This is a process whereby the main contractor reviews the files of the subcontractors to ensure that all documentation is up to date. A score is then given to the subcontractor. This is not something I was aware of before stepping onto this site so it was a very insightful experience. One of the days I worked with the electrical subcontractor. At the time they were doing stripping of the wires. In order to do so, we had to be very careful with which wires are cut and touched because cutting a live wire will result in fatalities on site. In order to properly strip the building of all its wires and power supply, we had to enter into very small spaces which was an unpleasant experience for me. I enjoyed the learning experience but not the tight spaces I had to enter in order to do so. Overall I got to learn a lot while working on site with all the different bodies. It was a very necessary experience for me and highly beneficial

### **Conclusion**

Through working in both the Quantity surveyor side of things as well as the construction manager side allowed me to get a better idea of where my strengths lie and where my weaknesses lie with regards to the two.