MAKWANDE AFRICA REPORT 2023

Introduction

Practical training provides an invaluable opportunity for combining academic theory with professional practice. My time with Makwande Africa Group, a young innovative company in South Africa, immersed me in both office-based processes and on-site realities. This experience taught me that construction is not a linear technical exercise but a highly collaborative and multidisciplinary practice requiring organisation, professionalism, and adaptability.

This reflection will critically explore my exposure to teamwork, administrative responsibilities, technical tools, project processes, and site activities. I aim to highlight both the professional and personal lessons gained from the placement.

Team Dynamics and Interdisciplinary Collaboration

From the outset, I was introduced to a diverse team that included engineers, the project manager, administrative staff, accounting staff, marketing professionals, and even the company's CEO. This experience highlighted that no work in construction is ever delivered in isolation. Each role contributes to the successful delivery of a project, whether through technical design, financial management, compliance, or community engagement.

I observed that respecting the expertise of others is vital. An engineer cannot succeed without accurate financial oversight, just as marketing and administration cannot operate without technical guidance. This broadened my appreciation for interdisciplinary collaboration and the importance of clear communication between different functions.

Reception and Professional Communication

Answering Calls and Reception Duties

One of my earliest roles involved working at reception, which required answering calls professionally and transferring them to the relevant staff. At first glance this appeared straightforward, but I quickly realised it required composure, clarity, and professionalism. Reception is the frontline of a company and it creates the first impression for clients, contractors, and the public.

I also learned the importance of personal presentation it iis important to look professional as it reflects the company's standards and builds trust with external stakeholders.

Email Communication

Another key skill I developed was writing and replying to professional emails. Attention to subject lines, headers, and concise yet clear language was vital. Quick responses were encouraged, but they had to be accurate and professional.

I also realised that email correspondence is tied to filing systems and record. Every instruction, decision, or communication must be documented to reduce disputes, ensure accountability, and maintain organisation. This experience sharpened my administrative skills and highlighted the necessity of written documentation in the construction industry.

Exposure to Accounting and Financial Management

Accounting was not an area I expected to be exposed to, but I gained valuable insights into the financial aspect of construction operations. Using SAGE accounting software, I saw how daily expenses such as coffee, petrol, electricity, and security contribute to keeping the office productive. While seemingly minor, these operational costs are essential for employee morale and functionality.

I also learned that beyond office expenses, financial management and cost control are critical for sustaining construction projects. Tracking expenses against budgets is necessary to prevent overruns. This gave me a new appreciation for the financial constraints within which engineers and project managers must operate.

Planning and Organisational Systems

Planners and Gantt Charts

I was shown how planners and Gantt charts are used to schedule and track project activities. The lesson here was that setup of the chart whilst important is not enough constant updating is equally important, as static charts lose relevance quickly.

SharePoint

The company’s SharePoint system was particularly valuable for storing company records and documents. It contained compliance certificates, employee CVs, and completion certificates. This centralised system reduces errors, saves time, and ensures transparency,especially during tender bids where missing a single certificate can disqualify an entire submission.

Tender Bids

I participated in the preparation of three tenders (Development Bank of SA , Dutywa, and Knysna). Tender processes require meticulous attention to detail. Every document,pricing schedules, CVs of key staff, B-BBEE certificates, and compliance forms had to be included, with no errors or omissions.One of the tender bids was a Consortium bid with other consultants for a major project.I realised that tendering is strategic, competitive, and unforgiving, but it is also the foundation for securing new work and sustaining company growth.

Technical Tools and Drawings

Google Earth Pro

I was introduced to Google Earth Pro as a tool for site reconnaissance, preliminary measurements, and understanding project context. It allows visualisation of terrain, surrounding communities, and infrastructure. This helped me understand how early geographical and spacial assessments contribute to cost estimation and project planning.

AutoCAD

I also worked with AutoCAD, the primary tool for technical drawings. Understanding these drawings, their notations, and their approval processes (through architects, consultants, clients, and contractors) revealed that approvals are rarely linear. Each project differs in complexity, and approvals often involve negotiation and revision.

Drawing Management

I was tasked with checking and updating drawings for a hospital renovation project. This was challenging, as some drawings were missing or outdated. The absence of building information modelling (BIM) meant updates were manual, time consuming, and required diligence. Ensuring that everyone had access to the latest version was vital to reduce errors and delays. This task improved my attention to detail and showed the importance of drawing management in construction.

Project Scales and Financial Structures

Through discussions and observations, I came to understand that large projects provide revenue, reputation, and growth for the company, while small projects sustain cash flow and keep teams active. This balance diversifies risk and builds a company’s portfolio.

I also worked with the Bill of Quantities (BoQ) for the first time, which I found more challenging than expected. The BoQ is the financial backbone of a project, translating

technical drawings into cost items. While templates for similar work help, every project requires individual adjustment. This exposure deepened my appreciation for cost management in construction but also showed me that maybe Quantity Surveying was not my path.

Meetings and Documentation

Written Records

One of the most important lessons was that all instructions must be written and documented. Without documentation, an instruction effectively does not exist. Written records protect employers, employees, and contractors, ensuring accountability and reducing disputes.

Meeting Environments

I attended both site meetings (in a container office) and formal office meetings with clients in town. The environments were very different. Site meetings were more practical, focused on immediate progress and challenges, while office meetings were more formal, requiring stricter dress codes, formal language, and structured procedures. I took minutes for both, which reinforced the importance of accuracy and clarity in recording decisions and discussions.

Site Work and Challenges

RDP Housing Project at Breidbach

I had the opportunity to engage in site activities at an RDP housing project in Breidbach. The project was frequently disrupted by strikes, community grievances (such as dust, traffic, and house allocation), and security issues. These challenges were managed in conjunction with local authorities and often required additional security measures, adding costs. This demonstrated how community relations can significantly impact construction projects.

Site Walkabout and Drainage Testing

During site walkabouts with the foreman, we identified missing elements and conducted drainage tests. A mirror and pressure test was carried out on the stormwater drainage system. At the pumping station, an unexplained influx of underground water overwhelmed the system. The cause was unkownbut speculation ranged from a burst pipe to overflow from a nearby dam. This problem highlighted how unexpected subsurface conditions can compromise designs and require urgent engineering solutions.

Health and Safety Audit

A health and safety officer conducted an audit and discovered that one contractor's safety file was incomplete. The officer shut down the contractor's work immediately. This had cost implications but reinforced the seriousness of compliance. The lesson was clear, health and safety cannot be compromised, and documentation must always be in order.

Reporting and Reflection

I was tasked with compiling a summary progress report. This included referencing the previous month's progress, documenting milestones, setbacks, decisions, and attaching photographs. This exercise improved my ability to synthesise information, track trends, and communicate progress to both internal teams and external clients.

Through this, I understood how progress reporting is a tool of accountability and planning and provides evidence of achievements while highlighting areas needing attention.

Personal Growth and Professional Lessons

Reflecting on my experiences, several key lessons stand out:

1. Professionalism and Soft Skills

Reception duties, email etiquette, and meeting protocols taught me the importance of soft skills in projecting professionalism and building trust.

2. Documentation and Organisation

From tendering to meeting minutes, I realised that written documentation is the backbone of construction management.

3. Financial Awareness

Exposure to accounting, SAGE software, and BoQs broadened my understanding of financial constraints and cost control.

4. Technical Adaptability

Tools like AutoCAD, Google Earth Pro, and SharePoint illustrated how digital systems support construction but also require careful human management.

5. Community and Compliance Challenges

Strikes, safety audits, and local grievances demonstrated that construction is deeply embedded in social contexts.

6. Leadership and Communication

I saw how project managers balance authority with accountability, how errors are handled, and how successes are celebrated.

7. Integration of Office and Site Work

Linking office-based planning and documentation with on-site execution deepened my appreciation for construction as a holistic practice.

Conclusion

My time with Makwande Africa provided a comprehensive insight into the dual worlds of office-based construction management and site-level realities. From answering phones to preparing tenders, from checking drawings to walking stormwater drainage lines, each task contributed to a deeper understanding of professional practice.

I learned that success in construction requires meticulous organisation, technical knowledge, financial discipline, community sensitivity, and above all, teamwork. This reflection underlines how workplace learning transforms theory into lived experience, preparing students for the complexity, responsibility, and adaptability required in the construction industry.

Date	Start Time	End Time	Total Hours	Activities
Week 1				
12 June 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Reception duties, answering calls, email correspondence, office orientation
13 June 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Reception, professional communication, document filing, record keeping
14 June 2023	09:00	17:00	8	SharePoint document management, checking compliance certificates, admin tasks
15 June 2023	09:00	17:00	8	AutoCAD drawings review, updating drawings for hospital renovation project
16 June 2023	–	–	–	Public Holiday
Week 2				
19 June 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Tender preparation, compiling pricing schedules, verifying CVs and compliance
20 June 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Google Earth Pro for site reconnaissance, preliminary measurements
21 June 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Financial management with SAGE, tracking operational costs, budget review
22 June 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Planning and Gantt chart updating, project scheduling, team coordination
23 June 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Tender consolidation, document checks, ensuring completeness for submission
Week 3				
26 June 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Site walkabout at RDP housing project, drainage testing, observation of community impacts
27 June 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Health and safety audit participation, compliance checks, reporting
28 June 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Drainage system assessment, troubleshooting unexpected water inflows

29 June 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Site documentation, reporting milestones, capturing photographs
30 June 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Progress reporting, summarising project setbacks, compiling weekly updates
Week 4				
03 July 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Coordination between office and site teams, checking compliance records
04 July 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Drawing management, updating site documentation, cross-checking approvals
05 July 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Monitoring project schedules, tracking BoQ items, financial awareness
06 July 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Administrative tasks, correspondence, tender support, team coordination
07 July 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Site visit, liaising with foreman, inspecting completed work, reporting
Week 5				
10 July 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Documentation, site walkabout, resolving minor issues, record keeping
11 July 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Final tender documentation, review of correspondence, team briefing
12 July 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Progress report preparation, photo documentation, tracking milestones
13 July 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Office-based coordination with site teams, updating project schedules
14 July 2023	09:00	17:00	8	Reflection and compilation of learning outcomes, final documentation

Total hours = 192