

Adopt and adapt as we enter a new age with increased competition

 By [Cindy Peters](#)

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As part of our #LockdownLessons series, Bizcommunity is reaching out to South Africa's top industry players to share their experience of the current Covid-19 crisis, how their organisations are navigating these unusual times, where the challenges and opportunities lie, and their industry outlook for the near future.

We chatted to Casian Dendere, chief executive officer of COENG, to get his take.



Casian Dendere, chief executive officer of COENG

■ **What was your initial response to the crisis/lockdown and has your experience of it been different to what you expected?**

Casian Dendere: I was initially surprised – and impressed – at government's drastic response to the arrival of Covid-19 in South Africa, but I quickly realised the necessity of the hard lockdown and was relieved that we as a company had already implemented the necessary technological infrastructure to allow us to work remotely. There was a brief teething phase while we all ensured we had the right security and teleconferencing software in place, but it has actually gone better than expected. I am very impressed at the agility of the COENG team.

■ **Comment on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on your organisation or economy as a whole.**

Dendere: In my view, the civil engineering and construction sector is the backbone of the economy and contributes significantly to employment and growth in the country. However, before the pandemic, the industry was in a slump with margins remaining tight amid a generally low market performance. There is no doubt that recovery of the industry will be even tougher now, but COENG is prepared to keep sailing these seas. As an established firm, we are better off than others and will do our part in uplifting the sector.



#LockdownLessons: Pandemic forcing us to think outside the box

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▣ *How is your organisation responding to the crisis?*

Dendere: We are ensuring that we communicate consistently with our stakeholders. In uncertain times, we know that our employees, clients, and partners need to be kept abreast of developments at COENG. During this pandemic, we have learnt that things can change in a moment's notice. Being able to embrace and communicate these changes has been integral to our operations.

▣ *Comment on the challenges and opportunities.*

Dendere: Obviously "business unusual" creates many new challenges, and they change all the time as we move through alert levels. First it was the work-life balance of working from home, which I know was tough for many people who were managing children, home-schooling, elderly parents, etc. The new challenge is the phased and safe return to work. However, I think the opportunity here is for companies to think outside the box in terms of operations. Now is the perfect time to reassess your systems and processes and see what can be adapted to better cater for your clients and – importantly – your staff.



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▣ *How has the lockdown affected your staff? / What temporary HR policies have you put in place regarding remote working, health & safety, etc.?*

Dendere: When President Cyril Ramaphosa announced the move from level 5 to 4, our teams went back on site where we continuously conduct screening and testing of personnel while also ensuring we comply with the guidelines that have been put in place. Our sites comply with the requirements of Covid-19 Occupational Health and Safety Measures in Workplaces COVID-19 (C19 OHS), 2020. We have also maintained that anyone who can work from home will continue to do so. Finally, anyone who has knowingly come into contact with a Covid-positive case has to inform us so that we can perform full risk management and respond accordingly.

▣ *How are you navigating 'physical distancing' while keeping your team close-knit and aligned?*

Dendere: It has been all about communication. It helps that we were already a close team with a world-class project management system in place to keep us aligned. However, we have seen our team-leaders really step up in reassuring their teams that their "open-door policy" remains in place. We understand the fears and uncertainty brought by this age, and have made it a priority to communicate clearly and frequently with our valued staff while also inviting them to share their experiences and ideas.



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▣ *How have you had to change the way you operate?*

Dendere: Obviously, we were unable to work on many of our sites for a long period, so that was a big disruption to the norm. But aside from that, our office-related tasks remained largely unchanged except that they moved to our homes. We have amazing cloud infrastructure and an integrated management system for our projects, so operations were able to continue.

▣ *Any trends you've seen emerge as a result of the crisis?*

Dendere: I foresee a more long-term adoption of virtual meetings driven by the ever-improving features and functionalities of teleconferencing apps, and a much lower tolerance for sitting in traffic.



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▀ Your key message to those in the sector?

Dendere: Adopt and adapt. The industry needs to grab this opportunity to adopt technology which will enable better service delivery, while also adapting to the changing needs and concerns of customers. We are entering a new age with increased competition, and you have to be agile to keep up.

▀ What do you predict the next six months will be like?

Dendere: With some reports expecting South Africa's Covid-19 infection rate to peak only in September, I expect the country to toggle between various alert levels as the government tries to balance national health with economic activity. It is going to be a rough ride and I think everyone is going to have to hang on tight.

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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