

# Opportunity to press the reset button

 By [Sindya Peters](#) 18 May 2020

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 Morag Evans, CEO at Databuild, to get her take.



Morag Evans, CEO at Databuild

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

**Morag Evans:** As soon as President Ramaphosa declared a national disaster on 15 March, we made arrangements for our staff to work from home. We are fortunate that our systems enabled us to do this quickly and effectively, with minimal disruption to our business operations. Our staff adapted exceptionally well to the new working dynamic and productivity levels are as high, if not higher than before the lockdown commenced. One would expect productivity levels to drop when your employees are working from home, but we have found our staff to be more focused during this time, which has enhanced their productivity.

The lockdown experience has been pretty much in line with our expectations, but as it continues indefinitely, we are becoming increasingly concerned about its long-term impact on the economy. The construction industry in particular was the grips of a serious downswing before the outbreak of Covid-19 and many companies are now facing permanent closure.

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

**Evans:** There has obviously been an impact on our business, but we are fortunate in that it has not been as harsh as that experienced by many others in our country. While we are only at the beginning of this pandemic and it is difficult to tell how things will progress, I am hopeful that the government will further ease lockdown restrictions soon to facilitate the reopening of the economy.

The construction industry, with the assistance of government, has the potential to make a significant contribution to the economy and help reduce unemployment. Local cement manufacturers have been particularly hard hit over the past few years by cheap imports from countries such as China, Vietnam and Pakistan. Our country has numerous cement-producing

plants which are more than capable of keeping up with local demand, but government's failure to stem the tide of Chinese imports has led to a steady decline in local manufacturing output, and negatively impacted the competitiveness of our local manufacturers. The current constraint on China's manufacturing output provides a golden opportunity for local manufacturers to reclaim the supply chain of these products as well as other locally produced materials.



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### How is your organisation responding to the crisis?

**Evans:** Communication is key during these times of physical distancing. We conduct daily online meetings with our team stay in touch and ensure that we all make the most of the opportunities presented to us during the lockdown period.

Another positive lockdown spin-off for Databuild has been the surge in demand for online training on our products. Again, our team has been very productive, and the time saved in driving to meetings has been well spent. One-on-one and group sessions are available and provide a good way to network with business associates safely.

### Comment on the challenges and opportunities.

**Evans:** Lockdown has given everybody more time on their hands. Besides catching up with admin and other mundane tasks they were previously unable to get around to, now is the perfect opportunity for managers to contemplate new and innovative ways to add value to their organisation, from an employee and supplier perspective. We advocate that companies use this extra time to plan their post-lockdown strategy so that as soon as it is over, their staff will be able to hit the ground running.

For example, our sales staff have not slowed down in building their pipeline, even going so far as to expand their reach to remote areas they had not previously explored. Of course, the added benefit is that being able to meet online with prospective clients eliminates the need for costly and time-consuming travel, so the return on these activities will be far more lucrative over the long term.

Additionally, to facilitate interaction between the construction industry network and enable stakeholders to take advantage of everyone's increased availability during lockdown, we have set up a communication hub which companies can use to keep one another informed on the remote facilities they have put in place within their own organisation. This will enable the relevant professionals to get in touch with them quickly and easily and make the most of opportunities presented to them.

Lockdown will end eventually and our objective at Databuild is to place our clients in the strongest position to move forward when this happens.



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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.?

**Evans:** Our IT team has been critical in helping us sustain our business operations during lockdown. They quickly and patiently resolved any issues we encountered along the way, and worked extremely hard to tighten our network security to mitigate the risk of cyberattacks. We consider our staff's virtual health and safety to be just as important as their physical wellbeing and we have gone to great lengths to educate them on how to stay safe and secure while working remotely. Cybercriminals also use the dissemination of fake news to exploit our fears and we continue to stress the importance of verifying sources of information before passing it on.

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

**Evans:** We are particularly mindful that not all employees enjoy working from home, and some may find the virtual working environment stressful, especially if there are small children in the household. To mitigate this, we communicate regularly with our staff to ensure they are coping well in the new working dynamic. This includes providing as much information as possible to help alleviate the anxiety caused by the enforced confinement. We have also established guidelines and set goals so that employees understand exactly what's expected of them while working from home, especially when it comes to meeting deliverables and targets.

### ■ *How have you had to change the way you operate?*

**Evans:** Databuild has been operating online since 2005, so lockdown has not caused any disruption to how our clients utilize our products.

When it comes to networking, we now host all our events online, including roundtable discussions with leading industry professionals about relevant issues, and informative webinars on topics geared to assisting clients with the challenges they are experiencing during the lockdown period. So far, the response has been extremely positive.



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

**Evans:** We have noticed a definite increase in email communications and campaigns. In fact, our experience has been that people favour more frequent campaigns from businesses they are engaged with and want to hear from them on a weekly basis.

That people are yearning for human interaction is evidenced from the notable surge in webinar attendance. Whether the topic is educational and informative, inspirational or a networking opportunity, people want to connect with other people, while learning something useful in the process.

I foresee that most companies will continue to work remotely, even after lockdown has ended. The time and costs saved by eliminating travel cannot be ignored and Databuild will certainly be applying lessons learned during lockdown to how we manage our operations going forward.

### ■ *Your key message to those in the sector?*

**Evans:** Covid-19 has afforded us the opportunity to press the reset button, as it were, which we can use to plan and implement change we may never have been able to put into effect prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. Consequently, managers' time would be well spent reflecting on how their company can contribute to rebuilding the construction industry post lockdown so that it's better off going forward.

The move to level four lockdown has enabled cement and construction material manufacturers to reopen for business, with projects in areas of water, energy, sanitation, roads and bridges are back online. This presents a golden opportunity for local manufacturers to boost their output and prove once and for all that our country's own suppliers are more than capable of keeping up with local demand and that there is no need to rely on other countries for these products. Not only will this go a long way towards helping vulnerable businesses stay operational and survive the current crisis, but it will also provide much needed stimulus to our ailing economy.

Time will reveal all the lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic, but the risk of sourcing from single suppliers cannot be ignored. It only serves to render the supply chain vulnerable in the event of a crisis such as the one we are currently experiencing.

I also urge all South African contractors to support local manufacturers in the coming months. Now, more than ever before local role players, including government, need to work together to uplift and expand our country's construction industry.



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

**Evans:** I think that we are in for a difficult time over the coming months. A lot depends on how quickly our industry will be allowed to return to work.

While we all have to face the unfortunate reality that many businesses will not be able to survive the lockdown period, it is also inevitable that the crisis will serve as a catalyst for other companies to repurpose their business model so that they retain, or even enhance their competitiveness post lockdown. Furthermore, I believe the lockdown will lead to the emergence of new businesses specifically geared to meeting the new requirements of a post-pandemic economy.

Economic recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic will be long and slow, but if South Africans stand together and timeously seize opportunities to strengthen local capabilities, we can turn it around.

## ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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