

Forestry training gets more technical, more specialised, more advanced

Training service providers are responding to the changing demands of the forestry industry with more focus on sector-specific skills, practical and experiential training and supervisor development. SA Forestry magazine spoke to ASHLEY DIACK of KwaMahlati Training Services ...

The nature of training required in the forestry sector is undergoing far-reaching changes, which is keeping service providers and facilitators on their toes, says Ashley Diack of KwaMahlati Training Services.

"The industry is demanding a higher level of training that is more technical, more advanced and more specialized than ever before."

Ashley says this is partly a consequence of modernisation, but also increasing global competition and financial constraints.

"Contractors need to get value for money out of training. This is coupled with a realization that training can add real value – it's no longer just a case of compliance."

He said that collaboration between key stakeholders in the industry has helped to create stability within the training environment. As a result service providers have been able to invest more resources (for example) into training their trainers, so that they can provide a more professional service to meet the rising demands of the sector.

Both Mondi and Sappi are participating in a training initiative, in terms of which the training service providers get paid for training timeously out of a special account administered by the SA Forestry Contractors Association (SAFCA).

Ashley explained that both Sappi and Mondi have developed a training matrix that specifies the minimum training that contractors must adhere to. For instance operators need to do a basic operator course followed by annual – and sometimes even six-monthly – refresher courses.

Sappi and Mondi deduct money monthly from contractors against their annual skills plans, which is paid into the Forest Contractors Productivity Initiative account. This money is held "in trust" for each contractor, and paid to the provider as and when training is conducted.

SAFCA, which has been contracted by Mondi to manage their contractor development programmes, administers this fund which has played an important role in facilitating effective training.



Chainsaw operator training in Uganda.



The first pilot group of Mondi supervisors attending one of the 24 modules of the Supervisor Development Programme.

Supervisor Training

An exciting aspect of the forestry training environment in recent times has been the development of supervisor training. The current programme was developed with wide stakeholder collaboration and is having a positive impact on the standard of forestry operations.

"The initial feedback that we have received from companies who have used this training has been very positive," said Ashley. "Some of our customers can't believe the transformation that has taken place since their supervisors attended the course."

"In the past supervisor training was generic, it wasn't forestry specific, yet supervisors carry a heavy burden of responsibility because of the environment

'Supervisors play an absolutely vital role in forestry operations, the importance of which is just beginning to dawn on a lot of people.' ASHLEY DIACK, KWAMAHLATI

in which they are expected to work."

He said that limited education, combined with limited opportunities for advancement, had led to supervisory challenges in South African forestry, and it is this that the programme is addressing. The modernisation of forestry operations is putting further demands on supervisors.

"Supervisors play an absolutely vital role in forestry operations, the importance of which is just beginning to dawn on a lot of people," said Ashley.

The Supervisor Development Programme is currently being revamped and upgraded to address some of the shortcomings that have been identified. This process is being overseen by SAFCA (see article on page 22).

Opportunities in Africa

KwaMahlati was established by Ashley 10 years ago to provide training services to the forestry industry. The company now has 10 full-time trainers and offers a broad range of courses, most of which are conducted on-site.

Ashley said that KwaMahlati is increasingly expanding into Africa, where forestry training is sorely needed.

"We have so far conducted training in Swaziland, Mozambique, Zambia, Uganda and Ghana – and this is becoming an expanding part of our business."

"There are a lot of opportunities for training providers in Africa. They are so far behind in terms of internationally recognised standards, and some companies are using service providers from South Africa to upgrade their operations." SAF



The introduction of new silviculture equipment, like this pitting machine, has provided training service providers with new challenges.



KwaMahlati trainers during a recent team-building exercise.

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