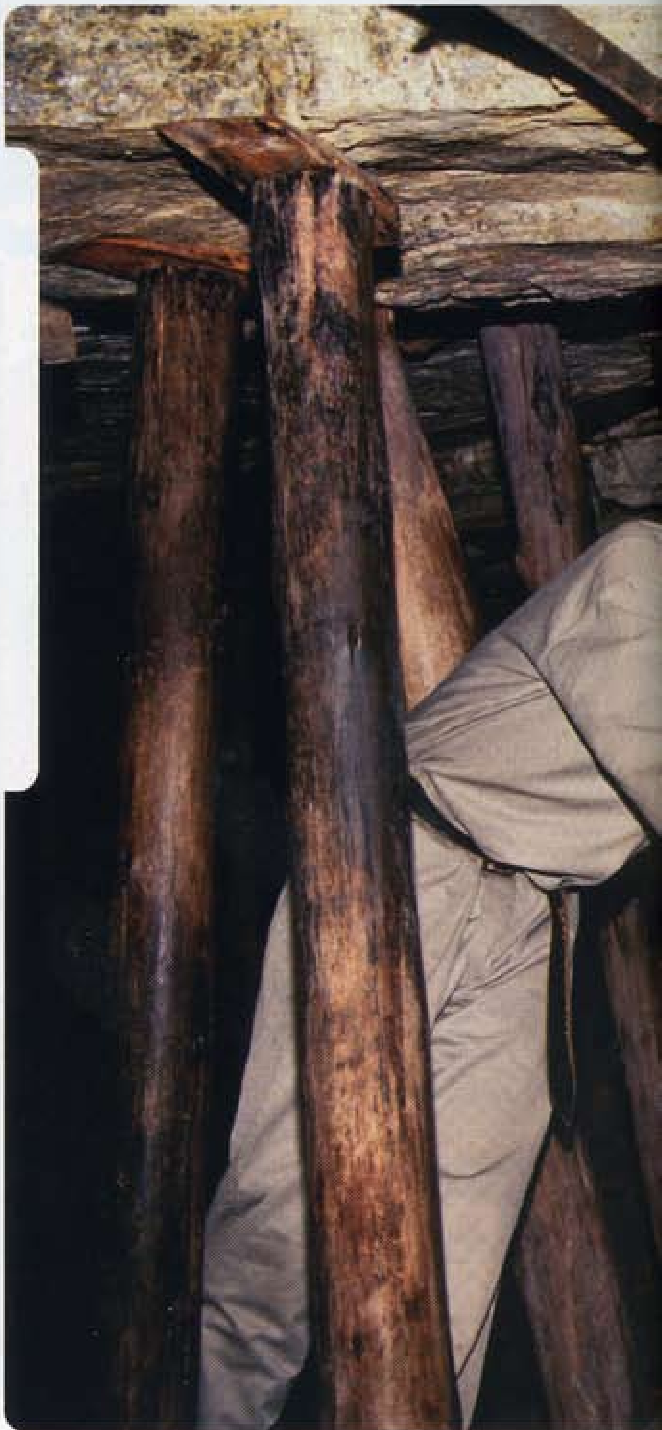
labour pains

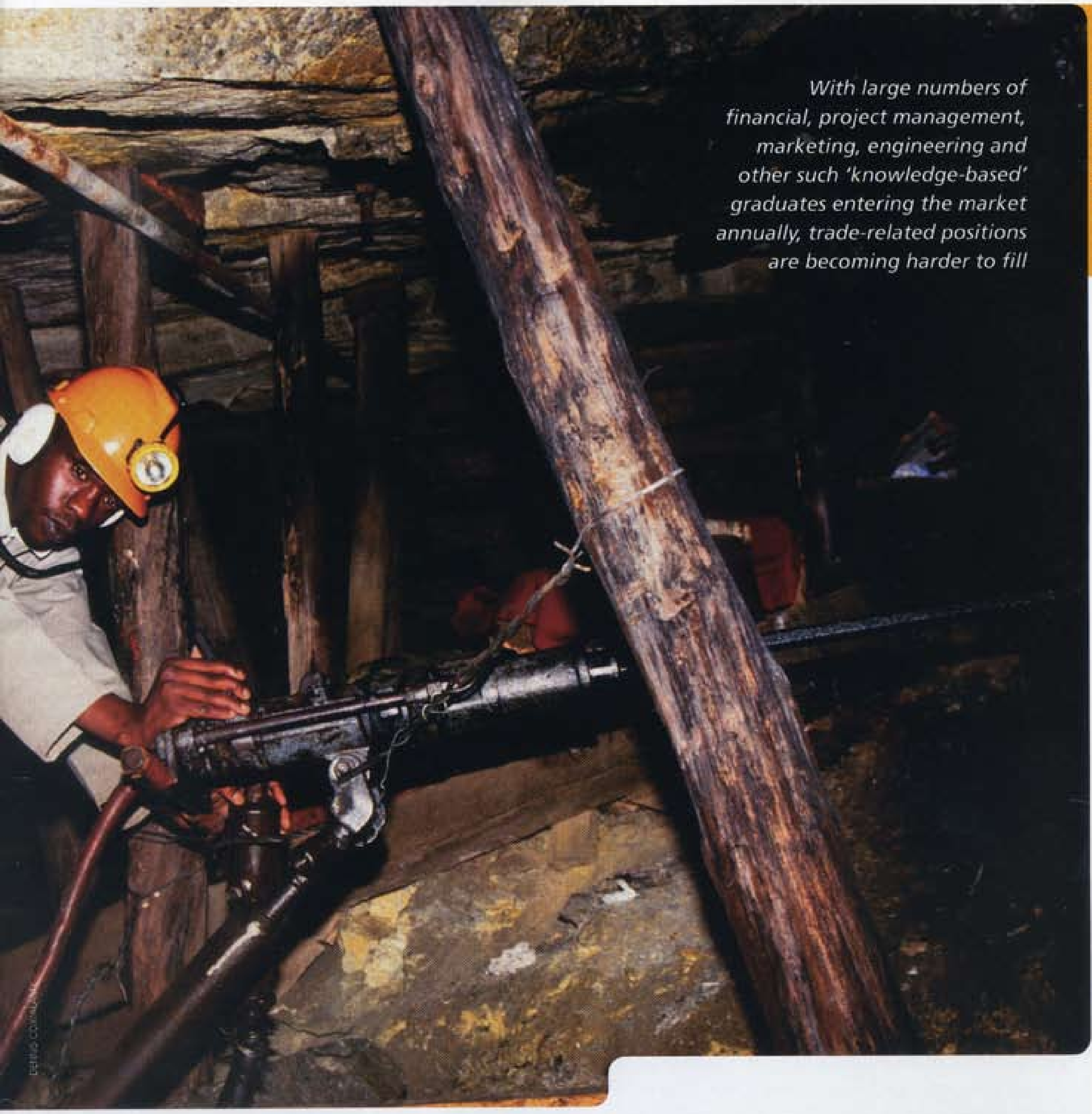


Plugging the African 'brain-drain' over the past decade has seemingly been successful ... too successful almost. **Kerry Dimmer** reports

Excellent economic growth does not always solve problems; sometimes, it creates them. One such problem is the growing 'general skills' shortage in Africa, particularly in the mining, engineering and construction sectors. With large numbers of financial, project management, marketing, engineering and other such 'knowledge-based' graduates entering the market annually, trade-related positions are becoming harder to fill.

According to Shaun Day of Kelly Industrial, the average age of an artisan in South Africa is 45-50 years, translating into a gap of 20 years before this average can be adjusted. Despite the target set by government for the registration of at least 12 500 artisans, only 1 400 registered for apprenticeships in 2006 as opposed to the 30 000 in the late 1970s and early 1980s. With South Africa set to host the 2010 Fifa World Cup, artisans are currently in high demand. So where are they?

'Various factors have contributed to the dearth of artisans,' Day answers. 'In the past, companies that were government-run, and are now privatised, trained more people than was needed, in order to ensure that a big pool was available. The practise of training en masse ended with the introduction of the skills levy. Private companies resented being forced to pay a skills levy on top of having to train their own staff. The result was that companies now only train a small group of artisans and even that is becoming rare because business owners are hesitant to spend the time and money on "in-house" trainees in case they are snapped up by other companies.'



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Miles Wakeford is the GM of Sustainability at Sandvik. This company employs around 3 500 people on the African continent (of its international 45 000) by providing specialised steel and tooling services for the engineering sector as well as tooling, equipment and related services for the mining and construction industries. Wakeford says that although the skills shortage has become a global issue there are many reasons South Africa specifically, is experiencing a skills drought: 'The South African schooling system is in poor shape and, from our point of view, getting worse. Industry and government are late in responding to the requirement to train. To make matters worse, South African artisans in particular, are targeted for international recruitment.'

Planning ahead is no easy task, but Wakeford predicts a need for an additional 500 artisans and technicians per year for Sandvik, for at least the next three years. This means that one third of the artisans that registered in 2006 would be guaranteed work with Sandvik alone.

Both Kelly Industrial and Sandvik are taking steps to alleviate the problem of the skills shortage. Kelly, for instance, has introduced a unique skills upliftment programme, while Sandvik has undertaken to increase its trade apprentices from 170 to 300 during 2008, and its full-time bursars from seven in 2007 to 22 in 2008.

Day expands on the Kelly Industrial approach: 'Known as the Kelly Industrial Flexi-Employee Upskilling Initiative, the programme seeks to up-skill a selection of flexi-employees

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every three months, in a different industrial market category, at no cost to the flexi-employee. We feel that through this initiative, our clients can sustain higher productivity levels as our flexi-employees will be constantly increasing their core competencies.'

Likewise Sandvik is not content to be left floundering. Its technical training centre has increased its training staff and invested in a mobile training unit that will operate from work sites around South Africa. 'In another initiative,' says Wakeford, 'we will also be launching a bridging programme to provide school leavers with an opportunity to enter our apprentice/learnership programme.'

Sandvik spent ZAR70 million on training in 2007 but expects this to increase to ZAR100 million in 2008. Wakeford continues: 'We have apprentice training operations in Zambia and Zimbabwe. Apprentices from these countries have traditionally been trained in South Africa because there were no such facilities in their homelands. Ghana is now set to join in this training programme.'

Such steps are timeous, but could be construed as 'accidental responses', to an appeal made in May by the South African Minister of Labour, Membathisi Mdladlana, who urged businesses to 'try hard to become a nation skilled enough to find its own solutions'.

Day says that though government has recognised the crisis, it also needs to realise that there is no overnight success.

'For instance,' he says, 'in 2010, there were talks of importing Chinese and German resources to help. Unions and government insisted that home-grown talent be supported first and foremost. But how do you get the numbers needed upskilled in time? The closer we get to 2010, the more skills will simply have to be imported ... and that will be difficult enough in terms of remaining competitive in terms of salaries.'

Day does, however, remain optimistic. 'I am confident that South Africa will make inroads in the long term but it will be far more difficult than initially envisaged. With the amount of money that has been budgeted for infrastructure, there is no doubt that it will result in an employment boom. The challenge is to turn the budgeted spend into actual spend.'

It is a simple fact that if African countries do not train the unemployed, particularly those who are desperate to learn a trade and become a professional, or start making the effort to do so, foreign 'skilled' artisans will step in to fill the gaping skills void. AD