

Propact keeps it in the family adding a fourth Bell TLB to its fleet

A lasting impression of how well a variety of earthmoving and agricultural machines were built, led a prominent Johannesburg businessman to invest in equipment from the same manufacturer, more than a decade and a half later.

When, in the mid-1970s, José Contente came to South Africa from neighbouring Mozambique after that country's independence, he joined a subsidiary of the LTA construction group, Construction Plant and Equipment. In the 10 years that he spent with the company, he rose from the position of Mechanical Foreman to being second in charge of the company.

"I had been fortunate to complete an industrial mechanical engineering apprenticeship in Mozambique and this, along with the experience I had, stood me in good stead in my new position in South Africa," José tells us. "I was, however, also learning how things worked in South Africa and by 1986, I felt confident enough to start my own plant hire business."

This José did in Johannesburg and he called it Propact Plant Hire cc. "When I started the business, I concentrated on hiring smaller compaction equipment to the Johannesburg and Pretoria municipalities and to this

day, this still makes up 70% of our core business. This customer base has now grown to include construction companies in the greater Gauteng, Vaal Triangle and Witbank areas too. We have steadily grown our range of equipment to include vibratory rollers (walk-behind and ride-on), air compressors with ancillary tools like jack-hammers and breakers, rammers and petrol breakers," he says.

"Some of the very first compaction and vibratory rollers we bought were Bomag machines, even though they were not yet distributed by Bell Equipment, but I can tell you these are the finest machines of their kind and some 30 years down the line, we're still using most of the original machines we acquired then."

Propact Plant Hire has a staff complement numbering 85 and according to José, most of them are machine operators, drivers and truck assistants. The company hires its equipment out on wet rates and with operators, operators who are well schooled in disciplines such as adhering to daily checklists and preventative maintenance. The company also boasts four mechanics in its Johannesburg head office workshop and another four who do field service.

"Quality machine-build and design coupled with sustained maintenance practices make for machine longevity and that is why 95% of our compaction equipment is from Bomag," he adds. "Our fleet of compaction equipment now numbers in the region of 100 vibratory rollers, 200 rammers, 200 petrol breakers and 25 compressors which are used a lot for demolition work and breaking of rock and concrete with jack-hammers."

José estimates that he first started entertaining requests from customers for tractor loader backhoes (TLBs) in 2008. "I was sceptical of adding TLBs to our fleet as I had in the past heard and seen a lot of abuse by machine operators who would do private work when not under proper supervision," José says. "To satisfy customers' demands, I would hire in TLBs to maintain service levels but made very little money on the deals due to the hire costs. In the end though, common sense prevailed and when it came to buying a TLB in February 2014, my first choice was a Bell 315SK 4x4 TLB as I had, in about 2002, visited the Bell factory in Richards Bay. The memory of how impressed I had been when seeing the manufacturing and assembly of a number of different machines had stayed with me since that time."

Propact Plant Hire's first Bell TLB immediately enjoyed high utilisation and with it being a new machine with its maintenance under warranty, done by Bell Equipment, customers felt confident of hiring the unit. By January the following year, Propact Plant Hire took delivery of its second Bell 315SK TLB and such was the demand for these machines, with their remarkably high mechanical availability, that a third machine was added to the fleet in July 2015.

"We find that the majority of our clients use our Bell TLBs for finishing work on sites such as leveling landscaped areas, loading and stockpiling material and housekeeping, all mostly using the front bucket," José says. "The Bell 315SK TLB is an economical machine as it is and with this type of relatively light work, fuel consumption figures make for light reading at about 6 litres of diesel an hour."

Due to demand and superior performance, the company added a fourth Bell 315SK TLB to its fleet in January 2016. Propact Plant Hire has taken an additional front and rear wheel set for their fleet of four Bell TLBs. While the machines are under warranty, servicing gets done by technicians from the Bell Customer Service Centre at Jet Park and José has been particularly impressed by the fact that they are prepared to service his Bell TLBs after the normal working hours when the machines are used by clients i.e. after 15:30 on weekdays or on Saturdays.

"We're seeing utilisation of our Bell TLBs of between 160 and 175 hours each month and we're now considering entering into a full-service maintenance contract with Bell Equipment," José says. "This we believe will ensure further longevity of these versatile workhorses with our clients benefitting from maximum uptime."

Propact Plant Hire is a modern South African company and is Level 2 BBBEE compliant. Like Bell Equipment, it is also a family run business with José's wife Adelaide being the Accountant, son Paulo the Branch Manager in Centurion, daughters Sandra and Karina, the Credit Controller and Human Resources Managers respectively, son-in-law Ricky dos Santos the Plant Manager and José's brother Fernando Maria, the Workshop Manager.



José Contente (left) with Danie Opperman, Bell Equipment Sales Representative.

