

PJ Plant Hire plots a success course with Bell TLBs

How do you get a 21-year-old to start his own business? Easy, you retrench him from his first paying job after school. But then it can't just be anyone or any business for that matter.

It has to be someone with pride and tenacity entering the competitive field of plant hire.

Jaco le Grange was retrenched from his first paying job since leaving school. "I was working as an assistant fitter for a gas company and when the company was absorbed into a larger group, I lost my job," he tells us. "I recall taking my mother and my girlfriend Lizette (now my wife) to show them a used Tractor Loader Backhoe (TLB) that I wanted to buy, repair and start hiring out on a plant-hire basis."

According to Le Grange, the two ladies in his life were not impressed as the neglected machine had weeds growing out of the fuel tank. But he used his savings to buy the machine and soon, not without toil and sweat, his TLB was up and running and earning him a modest

wage. The year was 2001 and PJ Plant Hire had entered the fray.

Moderate success prompted him to buy another similar used machine that he refurbished himself and soon enough, his fleet had doubled in size. His target market was and still is construction companies, and where he originally concentrated on his native East Rand, Johannesburg and Pretoria areas, his machines have worked further afield and on some key projects such as the Gautrain, the Gauteng Freeway Improvement Project and the Medupi Power Station.

By 2006 Le Grange had a fleet of 10 machines consisting of TLBs, excavators and 6-cubic metre tipper trucks. "As these were all machines bought on the second-hand market and needing constant maintenance, I had my younger brother Derick join the business as a diesel mechanic," he says. "Derick now looks after the machines' maintenance and I do the marketing and sourcing of new contracts."



From left: Bell Equipment Sales Representative, Kobus van Niekerk and owner of PJ Plant Hire, Jaco le Grange with David Mashakwe, the company's longest serving TLB operator with eight years of service and Jaco's brother Derick le Grange, who looks after the technical maintenance of the company's fleet.

As many will acknowledge, plant hire is a competitive field with many fickle clients who take snap decisions on rates alone. According Le Grange, an important element that clients often forget is whether hired machines can and do deliver maximum uptime through high mechanical availabilities.

"We noticed the advantage of maximum uptime when we bought four Bell 315SG 4x2 TLBs between 2007 and 2009," he adds. "Suddenly, our clients started remarking that our machines gave better service which assisted them in completing their projects on time. This subsequently led to us getting repeat business from loyal clients such as Group Five, Basil Read and Productive Plant Hire."

Another aspect of the business Le Grange noticed was the demand from clients for machines fitted with hydraulic hammers. With this in mind, he sold his first fleet of Bell 315SG TLBs out of hand and replaced them with four Bell 315SJ 4x4 TLBs in early 2011. These machines all have the correct piping for hydraulic hammers, factory-fitted by Bell Equipment. They are deployed on mostly demolition and construction sites.

"We opted for more Bell TLBs as the company offered us really competitive pricing," he enthuses. "With these new

machines and our operators working efficiently, the combination has a positive effect on our bottom line."

Le Grange is at pains to point out that operators can make or break any machine in a plant hire operation. PJ Plant Hire though is proud of the loyalty of its operators, most having five years or more service. Training the operators is done on a continuing basis and strict daily mechanical checklists are adhered to.

He is adamant that he does not want to expand his business to be too big, concentrating rather on maintaining a personal relationship with his list of loyal clients.

"In 10 short years, our business has grown to a manageable stage," he says. "We have four new Bell machines each fitted with a new hydraulic hammer, delivering high mechanical availabilities and subsequent benefits to our clients and a fleet of three new 6-cubic metre tipper trucks doing the same. We plan to start implementing a strategy of replacing our equipment every three years which means that Bell Equipment will definitely be part of any future plans we have as we already have two new Bell TLBs in our sights."

"But ultimately, it's in God where our trust remains with our lives geared to His Word."

