

Bell fleet helps new mining contractor find its feet

When the COVID-19 pandemic all but shut down the world as we knew it, there was a lot of talk of small businesses, especially restaurants and 'mom and pop' stores, having to close. The same applied to performing artists who suddenly had no audiences.

But one should also spare a thought for the likes of self-employed engineers who, as professional people, suddenly couldn't rely on new contracts being issued and saw a dramatic drying up of income beyond their control.

Two such engineers are Amos and Karabo Manaka. Karabo, an electronics engineer, and her husband Amos, an industrial engineer with a postgraduate qualification in civil engineering, had worked for major petroleum, energy, and mining companies in planning, coal handling, and water purification. Their varied portfolio under their trading name of Equinox Engineering Solutions even includes paving and sidewalks in the City of Tshwane.



"We sat isolated at home and tossed around ideas of how to make a living in the future when the idea of contract mining arose," Karabo says. "With no new contracts being issued by our existing clients we were looking for alternatives which we needed rather urgently."

"There had been talk of a large platinum mine in the North West Province issuing contracts to emerging contractors for drilling, loading, and hauling of platinum ore and, although this was a totally foreign field to us, we thought that with our backgrounds we could learn to understand this industry and make a go of it," Amos says. "We therefore tendered on the load and haul segment of the contract thinking that we'd be able to raise finance and buy loading and haulage equipment on the used market to make a start."

But raising finance turned out to be far more challenging than the Manaka couple had hoped it would be and they were sent from pillar to post without so much as a cent or favourable interest rate being offered. And without finance, they could not begin to look at loading and haulage equipment, even on the used market.

But help was at hand as Karabo explains: "We had, through a mutual friend from our church, met Bruce Ndlela of Bell Equipment, and with Bruce's easy and affable manner, we felt comfortable to think that we could establish and develop a business relationship

with Bell Equipment where Bruce has the title of Director: Business and Public Sector Development."

"We subsequently also met Bell Sales Representative, Enock Mabaso, and immediately got the feeling that Bruce, Enock and their colleagues at Bell Equipment were not only listening to us but also fully appreciated our position, which other suppliers had not done," Amos adds.

Here Bruce Ndlela takes up the story. "I met Amos and Karabo Manaka of Equinox Engineering Solutions and, after listening to their business plan and the difficulties they had encountered with both equipment and financial services suppliers in the industry, immediately requested that given the long lead-time on machines, we sign an official purchase order for four new B45E Articulated Dump Trucks and a new Kobelco SK850LC-8 Excavator. To secure the order we installed an equal number of used units as we do with many customers to assist them in getting their contracts off the ground and generating cash flow which would in time create a win-win situation. This is done on a rental basis with an option to purchase that equipment (ROP)."

Bruce adds that having won the one load and haul tender at the particular platinum mine, Equinox Engineering Solutions, along with another company, became a preferred supplier to the mine and could rely on one of two five-year contracts.



Equinox Engineering Solutions COO, Amos Manaka, with the company's CEO, Karabo Manaka, and Bell Equipment Sales Representative, Enock Mabaso.

"We, as Bell Equipment, interacted with the mine as well and laid the foundation for Equinox Engineering Solutions to get started in a challenging but exciting new field. We recognised that as engineers Amos and Karabo are clear thinkers and solutions-driven professionals."

"We were happy to take delivery of the first used equipment in November 2022 when three Bell B40D Articulated Dump Trucks arrived along with the Kobelco SK850LC-8 Excavator," Amos says. "Then in the following month, we took delivery of two further used Bell ADTs, a B40E and B45E model, both of which have boosted our production."

"The Kobelco SK850LC-8 Excavator had clocked some 8 200 hours and the Bell B40D ADTs had done between 11 000 and 30 000 hours and this is a testament to Bell Equipment's legendary solid design and build to see that despite these high hours these Bell B40D ADTs still get the job done daily." The rental package also

includes a Bell Care Package that sees Bell mechanics from the Rustenburg branch attending to services every 500 hours and repairs when needed.

According to the contract with the platinum mine, Equinox Engineering Solutions has been tasked with a monthly target of moving 250 000 bank cubic metres (bcm) of overburden to a stockpile. To do this efficiently they had to appoint three teams of operators who all came from a village near to the mine.

"The applicants were all keen to learn and we were fortunate to be able to give them top-class training with the assistance of Bell Equipment Trainer, Temba Lucky," Karabo says. "Temba took his time while training the operators thoroughly and with his help, and that of the mine, the six months it took to train these operators properly is now paying off handsomely."

Karabo stresses that while operating a piece of mining equipment is merely the start, doing it safely during every hour of every shift is what counts, especially in a mine where there are many potential hazards.

"We're slowly ramping up to meet our monthly target and we believe that once we've concluded negotiations with lenders to fund the four new Bell B45E ADTs along with the equally new Kobelco SK850LC-8 Excavator, we'll be a competitive and

productive unit," Amos says. "We're eternally grateful to Bell Equipment for reaching out to us and assisting us in a steep learning curve of this contract mining industry along with its pitfalls, challenges, and rewards."

Amos adds that they appreciate the support they've had from their clients at the mine who realise contractors can only commit to capital expenditure

