

Press Release

Female energy: AES celebrates gender diversity, challenging engineering sector stereotypes

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During August, operations and maintenance service providers to the steam and boiler sector, Associated Energy Services (AES) celebrates the pioneering, energetic women who are challenging stereotypes within the engineering and industrial space, says Managing Director, Chris Paterson.

“Historically, the boiler house operations and maintenance sector has been dominated by men. There were not many women, particularly on site. However more recently, this has started to change,” he observes.

As engineering and industrial skills are in short supply, AES had developed women internally, by employing female boiler assistants and then training and promoting them into operational and maintenance positions.

AES currently has 58 women out of a total of 307 staff in their workforce, where it should be noted that the major portion of its personnel are site based in hands on energy operations and maintenance roles. An added bonus is that more women have embarked on technical training in recent years and AES has identified a number of very strong female candidates, he says.

Paterson says AES has always employed the best person for the job, and that all women within AES are there strictly on merit.

However, he admits that a number of challenges remain, especially when placing female employees on clients’ manufacturing sites, such as a lack of women’s changing rooms and other facilities. Where women do need to use public transport and are potentially at risk, AES provides self-defence training.

Notwithstanding the inherent challenges, Paterson and his team place much value in diversity, and AES is employing more women in line with this ethos. Paterson says he is also looking forward to seeing more female staff obtain Government Certificates of Competency (GCCs) in the mechanical, technical or electrical sectors in the near future.

Repainting the picture of women in engineering

Portia Monama joined AES in February 2021, starting as a Procurement Administrator before being promoted to her current position as Procurement Manager.

She believes that it is particularly important for women to be included in engineering:

“I think any industrial or engineering company that is excluding women is limiting itself when it comes to the amount of knowledge, experience and talent which women can bring to any organisation. For me, it is crucial to be deliberate about gender diversity, and about developing women in these historically male-dominated spaces.”

This will be achieved at grass roots level. “We must literally ‘repaint’ the pictures of different industries through things as small as circulating more images of women wearing their personal protective equipment on site. Once these visual representations of women in industry become more mainstream, I think it will inspire more women to enter the

engineering field, challenging the stereotypical perception that this is a difficult field for women to be in.”

In terms of AES, however, Monama values the extent to which the company has supported, empowered and upskilled the women in its ranks.

“Ultimately, AES holds women to the same performance standards as men. Women are in meaningful positions doing worthwhile work, and their employment is not just about legislative compliance or ‘box ticking’. For me, that speaks to the integrity of AES, and its understanding that as women, we want to be held to the same standards - and do not want special treatment,” she says.

Her advice to other young women wishing to follow in her footsteps is simple: “Go to school! We can only rely on talent, policies and women development initiatives to a certain extent. Get the experience. If you are going into an industry like this, don’t be scared to go into the trenches and get your hands dirty.”

Building a safe, nurturing environment

Sonika Kock joined AES in November 2013 as Regional Administrator in the Eastern Cape, a role that she says involves being everything from mother to psychologist to team player!

A career highlight was being part of AES’s ISO for 9001, 14001 and 45001 implementation and certification in 2015. “With no prior ISO exposure and experience, it was extremely challenging, but a highly rewarding process. After the certification, I was appointed the Integrated Management System (IMS) representative in the region,” she says.

Kock’s next career goal is enrolling for a NEBOSH international qualification in environmental health and safety.

Another important role for Kock is building and facilitating inter-staff relationships: “This is where my passion is - heart and soul – and we have an open door policy where everyone feels comfortable discussing their issues and concerns. We offer a safe environment where everybody gets treated equally and with respect, understanding and support. Good employer relationships in the workplace result in satisfied employees and a positive environment increases operational efficiencies,” she maintains.

This nurturing environment is just one of the factors that makes AES an employer of choice for its employees, she adds.

“The AES way or ethos rests on three focal points: *People, Plant and Performance*, of which the first is people. Everyone is given the same resources and opportunities regardless of gender and circumstances ”

Women as role models in engineering

Caitlin La Reservee graduated with a Diploma in Mechanical Engineering in April 2020, and joined AES in November 2020 as a production technician. Two years later, she was promoted to her current role as Production Supervisor, Eastern Cape.

She believes women have a vital and dynamic role to play in engineering: “Engineering allows one to be creative, inventive and to solve real life problems. Engineering can make a meaningful impact on the world. So, by including women in this space, it allows them to infuse the industrial space with fresh experience, ideas and perspectives.”

La Reservee also says it is important to change the way that women in the engineering and industrial sectors are perceived.

“We must address misconceptions about what engineering actually is - and how broad the sector is. If women had a better understanding of what engineering entails – particularly from secondary school level - I think they would join the profession. We need more women as role models in engineering,” she observes.

Though offering bursaries and apprenticeships for women in engineering, La Reservee says companies like AES can help to bridge the gender gap.

“During my time at AES, I have completed numerous short courses specifically relevant to my duties and responsibilities, equipping me to grow within my career.”

She also credits Associate Director and Eastern Cape regional manager Raymond Lund, with not only recognising her potential, but ensuring she is constantly challenged.

Her advice to those wishing to follow a similar career path is encapsulated in a quote from the character Dory from Finding Nemo: “‘*Just keep swimming,*’ and you will be noticed, rewarded, and come out on top!” she concludes.

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Note to Editors:

AES is a pioneering, innovative, reliable and experienced steam and boiler operations and maintenance (O & M) service provider. The company has been in existence for over 25 years and is widely regarded as the leading O & M provider in steam and boiler operations and maintenance service in South Africa. Target industry sectors include power generation, chemical, plastics and rubber, timber, pulp and paper, textiles, food and beverage, dairy, poultry and mining.

AES's purpose is to assist industrial plants to optimise their energy production processes, and achieve energy usage best practices, through the following offerings: the mitigation of risk and the reduction of plant downtime; the procurement of efficient fuel combustion; assistance with the care of assets over the plant's lifetime; diversification of the plant's energy resources; improvement in site operations; and a reduction in carbon footprint.

AES subscribes to the highest ethics and operates according to high safety standards, process excellence and product and service innovation, exhibiting a commitment to quality, technology advancement and the development of human capital. AES invests heavily in training and the promotion of talented people on an equal opportunity basis into the industrial operations environment. The company believes that making a positive difference to communities and the environment is the best way to ensure that everyone benefits from good work.

AES is ISO 9001, 14001 and 45001-certified, ensuring that the company maintains a focus on achieving, benchmarking and optimising its processes and activities.

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