

Denel seeks top engineering and technical graduates

The defence industry is positioning itself more prominently to attract a greater share of top engineering and technical graduates produced by South Africa's university and higher education system.



"We want to create a dynamic environment where the best and brightest students choose to pursue future careers in defence - and security-related sectors, such as aviation, aerospace and high-tech manufacturing," said Natasha Davies, the acting group executive human resources and transformation of Denel SOC.

The technology that Denel develops is increasingly being used to find solutions for other challenges that confront society, such as rhino poaching, smuggling of illegal substances, border control, space science and research into alternative energy sources.

Davies said that the Africa Aerospace and Defence Exhibition (AAD) last year raised awareness of the achievements and capabilities of the local defence industry. It also focused on the contribution the sector makes towards the growth of high-end manufacturing that can help to broaden South Africa's industrial base.

Through Denel's leadership position across the spectrum of defence manufacturing it is able to offer opportunities to prospective graduates in most engineering and technical disciplines.

"Our involvement in the industry starts with our support for maths and science teaching programmes aimed at high school learners," said Davies. Engineers at Denel companies spend weekends and holidays to provide extra tuition to learners who want to improve their marks in these subjects.

Bursaries offered

Some of the top students are then offered bursaries by Denel to study engineering at local universities with the prospect of being offered positions within the group on completion of their studies.

The Denel Technical Academy in Kempton Park focuses on the training of artisans and qualified technicians, especially in the aviation industry. Students receive financial support from Denel to cover their tuition fees and the academy also assist

in placing them with other companies involved in the industry to pursue future careers.

Davies said that there is "huge competition for the available talent pool" of engineering students at universities and technikons.

"Our objective is to position a defence industry that provides exciting opportunities for young engineers who are looking for careers on the cutting edge of research, development and project management."

Through the years, Denel has been responsible for the design and manufacturing of world-class products, such as the Rooivalk helicopters and the Seeker 400 unmanned aerial vehicle, while Denel Aerostructures is a top-tier supplier to the Airbus A400M, the world's most advanced military airlifter.

In the past financial year Denel spent R752 million on both client and self-funded research and development - 21% of turnover - R178 million of this amount was self-funded and Denel has aspirations to grow this investment to ensure that it can stay ahead of the game in a highly competitive global industry.

Planning ahead

Davies said that Denel is fortunate to draw on the experience of engineers and project managers who have been involved in the industry for many decades, but the company has to plan for the reality that these employees will soon reach retirement age.

"The challenge is to retain the skills and knowledge of our existing workforce and supplement that with the enthusiasm and energy of young engineers that enter the company. These newcomers often have a great understanding of new technology and modern production processes and we want to ensure that they can find long-term careers with Denel," she said.

Junior and mid-career managers at Denel attend the company's Executive and Management Development Programmes to prepare them for future leadership positions and the company is ensuring that it has clear succession plans in place for each of the entities.

Davies said that the company also wants to dispel the perceptions that the defence sector is by nature a male environment. It has policies and programmes in place to attract more women to Denel and it works with organisations such as South African Women in Engineering and Techno -Girl to stimulate interest in the industry among young female students.

The company also wants to promote transformation and diversity in the industry by attracting more black employees and through its supplier development programmes that favour small and medium enterprises as partners in Denel's supply chain, she said.

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