
The Impact of Covid-19 on Job Security of Millennial Quantity Surveyors

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ABSTRACT

The covid-19 pandemic brought about disruption, change and challenges in many industries including the construction industry. Quantity Surveyors are the cost consultants of this industry. In 2021, 72% of all quantity surveyors in South Africa were younger than 45 years and the vast majority of this group form part of the millennial cohort. Millennials are the future upon which the quantity surveying profession will build and job security plays a key role when it comes to retaining talent. The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact covid-19 had on job security of millennial quantity surveyors. A quantitative research design was utilised making use of a questionnaire as research instrument. The questionnaire was distributed nationally by the Association of South African Quantity Surveyors. The main findings indicate that 63% of millennial quantity surveyors felt that their jobs are not secure anymore and 48% indicated that they were considering emigration. The findings of this paper will be of value to quantity surveying employers as well as associations and professional bodies in the Built Environment.

Keywords: Quantity surveying, Millennials, Covid-19, Job security

INTRODUCTION

The covid-19 pandemic has brought about disruption, change and challenges in most industries, including the construction industry. Quantity surveyors are the financial consultants of this industry who has a broad knowledge of construction economics and advise clients on cost and contractual arrangements (Maritz & Sigle, 2010; ASAQS, 2022). In 2021, the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession's annual report indicated that 72% of all quantity surveyors in South Africa (both candidate and professional quantity surveyors) are younger than 45 years (SACQSP, 2021). The vast majority of this group belong to the millennial cohort. Millennials are widely cited as the cohort of people born between 1980 – 2000 (van Eck, Burger, 2018). Most millennial quantity surveyors have entered the workplace and are currently between 22 to 42 years of age (as at 2022). The last of this cohort are set to graduate and join the profession over the next two to three years followed by Generation Z.

Millennials are the future upon which the quantity surveying profession will build. They are the next generation to lead this profession in a world facing continual technological, economic and political disruption. It is therefore important to retain the expertise of this generation and successfully pass

the baton from one generation to the next. The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact covid-19 had on job security of millennial quantity surveyors in South Africa. Little research is available on this topic specifically and the results of this study aim to contribute towards that gap in knowledge.

LITERATURE

The construction industry is a key role player in job creation in South Africa. This industry also contributes indirectly to job creation across other sectors. Sectors that benefit from construction output include among other manufacturing, mining, real estate and business services (CIDB, 2021). South Africa's construction industry was brought to a halt on 27 March 2020 as the nation entered a hard lockdown in response to the global covid-19 pandemic. This industry was not classified as an essential service and therefore work on construction sites were suspended for several weeks (South African Government, 2022; GlobeNewswire, 2022).

Construction activity in South Africa followed a sharp downward trend due to the imposed lockdown regulations and construction activity resumed on 1 June 2020. South Africa's economy was hit hard by the pandemic with the official unemployment rate rising to 34.9% in the third quarter of 2021 (StatsSA, 2021). An analysis done by Master Builder's South Africa indicated that 60% of jobs in the construction industry were vulnerable during the hard lockdown period and up to 20% could be lost in the short term (Odendaal, 2020: online). Job security in this sector was under threat by the uncertainties brought about by the pandemic.

South Africa's government is a major contributor towards infrastructure development. Due to the pandemic the government had to divert infrastructure spending to help alleviate the economic and social distress the country was facing (Aon, 2022: online). This placed the construction industry and job security under more pressure.

The phased reopening of the economy had allowed the construction industry to move forward and build momentum again while managing the loss of time, money and resources. Government is increasing its focus on infrastructure and energy investment initiatives and the construction sectors is expecting an average yearly growth of 3.4% over the next four years (Bhadare, 2021).

Since the onset of the pandemic quantity surveyors had to face uncertainty and challenges regarding the management of construction- and consultancy contracts in unprecedented circumstances (Doyles Construction Lawyers, 2020). Quantity surveying activities impacted by the pandemic related to project completion, project scheduling and delays, supply chain as well as tendering, project cost control and claim and dispute management (Hansen, Rostiyani, Rizaldi & Andjarwati, 2021). The pandemic affected the operational health of businesses and organisations. Despite the havoc caused by covid-19, the pandemic also brought about new opportunities for businesses such as the implementation of new technology, virtual environments and developing new flexible ways of working (Ogunnusi, Hamma-adama, Salman, Kouider, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research design was utilised in the form of survey-based research. A mono research method in a cross sectional time horizon applied making use of questionnaires as research instrument. This study is based on a questionnaire from the Association of South African Quantity Surveyors (ASAQS), assisted by the University of Pretoria. The ASAQS distributed the questionnaire nationally to all South African quantity surveyors on the database. This study only considered questionnaires filled out by millennial quantity surveyors. A total of 314 valid responses were received from millennials. This is representative of approximately 12% of millennial quantity surveyors in South Africa. A statistical data analysis was conducted making use of Microsoft Excel. A pivot table was created to summarise and group the relevant data from the questionnaire. Data from the pivot table was used to create pie charts and graphs to visually display the findings.

FINDINGS

The main findings, as shown in Figure 1, indicate that since the covid-19 pandemic 63% of millennial quantity surveyors felt that their jobs are not secure anymore. The respondents who did not experience job security were to indicate what other employment alternative they would consider if they were to lose their job. The majority said that they would seek employment within the Built Environment by either joining another QS firm, working at a construction firm or start their own QS practice. As shown in Figure 2, 16% indicated that they would leave the industry and seek employment elsewhere and 1% did not provide any response. These statistics indicate that overall 83% of millennial quantity surveyors are willing to remain in the construction industry despite the uncertainty brought about by covid-19. This sheds a positive light towards retaining talent and intellectual capital in this cohort.

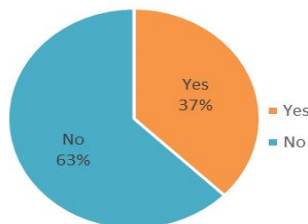


Figure 1: Job security of millennial quantity surveyors (Source: Author, 2021).

Figure 3 shows that 46% of the respondents indicated that they have considered emigrating before the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic. When the same was asked for “after covid-19” the response increased by 2%, indicating that 48% are now considering emigration.

Given the impact covid-19 has had on South Africa’s economy and unemployment rate, it comes as no surprise that 69% of millennial quantity

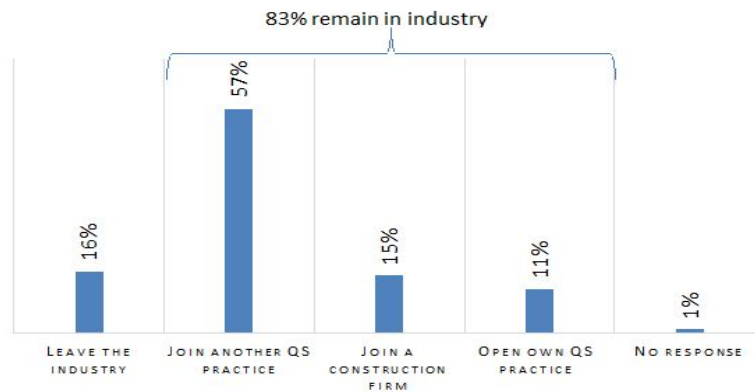


Figure 2: Alternative employment considerations. (Source: Author, 2021).

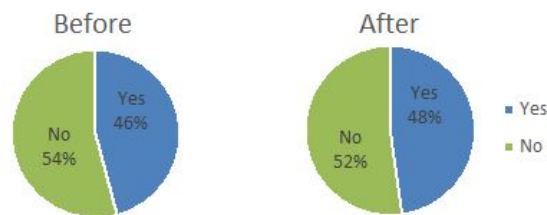


Figure 3: Millennials considering emigration before and after covid-19 (Source: Author, 2021).

surveyors indicated that they were willing to accept a salary decrease in order to hold their current jobs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The statistical evidence presented in this paper will be of value to quantity surveying employers when it comes to succession planning of firms from a human capital point of view. It will allow employers to rethink and plan more strategically around job security and retaining young talent. The findings will also be of value to the ASAQS who is the voluntary body for this profession in South Africa and plays a key role in supporting quantity surveyors.

Recommended further research should explore innovative ways to improve job security for this profession. Comparing the results of this study with similar international results will also allow researchers to draw broader conclusions of covid-19’s impact on construction professionals globally.

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