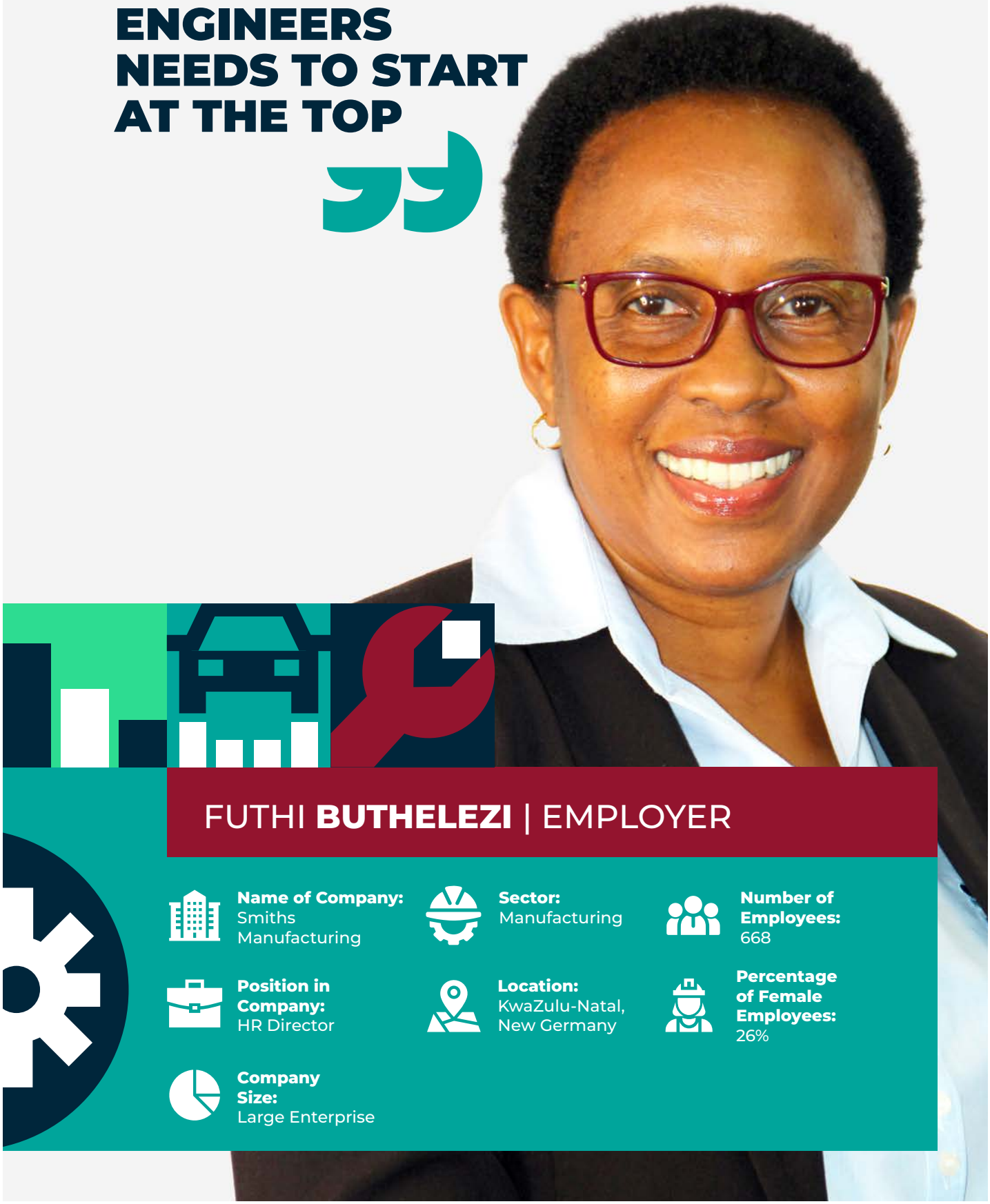
THE DRIVE FOR MORE FEMALE ENGINEERS NEEDS TO START AT THE TOP



FUTHI **BUTHELEZI** | EMPLOYER

Name of Company: Smiths Manufacturing

Sector: Manufacturing

Number of Employees: 668

Position in Company: HR Director

Location: KwaZulu-Natal, New Germany

Percentage of Female Employees: 26%

Company Size: Large Enterprise

> **WE WANT TO ADDRESS HISTORIC GENDER IMBALANCES** BY INCREASING THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN.

THE DRIVE FOR MORE FEMALE ENGINEERS NEEDS TO START AT THE TOP

If the industry wants to succeed in attracting and retaining female engineers, the drive needs to come from the top. The buy-in of the most senior company members is needed, it cannot just be left to human resources managers. Our MD at Smiths Manufacturing, Selvin Konar, takes a personal interest in ensuring the success of our transformation initiatives and a key driver to this is attracting and retaining women, as alluded to, we have a targeted approach.

ALIGNING PROGRAMMES TO OUR EMPLOYMENT EQUITY PLANS

Smiths Manufacturing has historically been a male dominated company, but we are working on transformation and have several initiatives to attract and absorb women into the organisation. Regarding recruitment, we align our programmes to our employment equity plans and we have agreed internally that in all positions we will prioritise hiring female employees. At the graduate level, we also focus on recruiting female graduates and ensure that they rotate across the different departments to gain a variety of experiences.

WE WANT TO ADDRESS GENDER IMBALANCES

Our first reason for these various initiatives is legislative compliance to ensure equity and provide opportunities to females, especially African females. The second is the realisation that we need diversity in the company which creates a balanced view and a range of different strengths. We want to address historic gender imbalances by increasing the representation of women. We are making progress and there are reasons to celebrate. I am the first female African director at Smiths Manufacturing, and after approximately 65 years of operations, we now have two females in board leadership roles and two in executive leadership roles.

FEELING HEARD AND FEELING SAFE

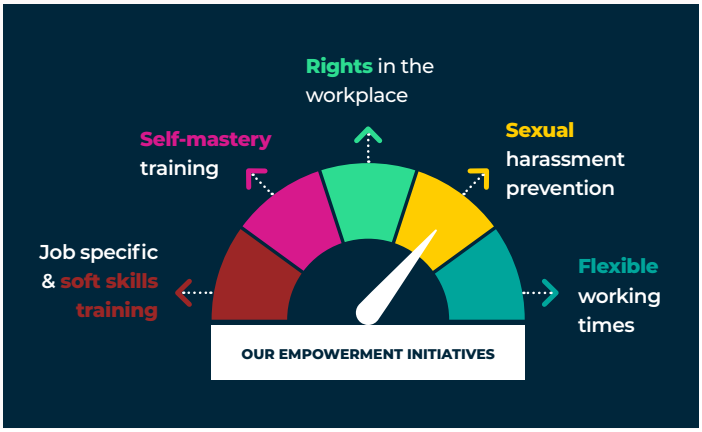
When it comes to the training and development of our female employees, we have several empowerment initiatives. We prioritise training opportunities for our female employees, both job specific and soft skills training. We have self-mastery training which includes self-management, coping strategies and how to balance work and personal life, and we have programmes informing women of their rights in the workplace, including how to address sexual harassment. We want to ensure that women feel heard and feel safe in the workplace.

SUPPORTIVE COMPANY CULTURE AND POLICIES

We have sexual harassment policies in place and ensure that all employees are aware of issues of conduct. We realise that people may have prejudices and so we also educate our workforce to ensure that our company culture allows women to thrive.

We have introduced flexitime to help women with children so that they have sufficient time to manage the school drop offs and collections. Our core working hours for employees to be at work is 08:30 – 15:30; this enables our employees to either arrive early and leave earlier or start work later, depending on individual circumstances. The exact working pattern is negotiated with one's line manager. We do not want people with young children to struggle.

We try to make sure that we get feedback in working towards the demographic balance of the organisation. Annually we run an anonymous survey where we ask our employees about their understanding of our vision, their level of satisfaction with their roles, and their satisfaction with leadership. We analyse the comments and put actions in place to address any concerns.



DEVELOPING THE NEXT GENERATION OF FEMALE ENGINEERS

We have programmes to support and develop the next generation of female engin eers. We have bursaries for employees and students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal with a target of 80% females who are also then offered in-service training. We provide in-service training to students from the Durban University of Technology where we also prioritise female students.

Key highlights of these interventions include that we are currently funding 14 African female employees who are studying in a variety of areas, including mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, and quality management. We fund five female students, three studying electrical engineering and two studying mechanical engineering. When they have qualified, we will provide training opportunities and aim to absorb them into the company. We want to develop them so that they understand the Smiths Manufacturing way.

THE INDUSTRY COMPETES FOR FEMALE ENGINEERS

At Smiths Manufacturing, we have mechanical, industrial, product, and quality engineers. We have a few females in these engineering professions, but we have found retaining them can be a challenge. As there are so few female engineers in the industry, there is high competition between organisations.

The women explained that their main reasons for leaving were that they wanted to explore and broaden their experience. We do understand this as most of our employees start with us as trainees and so they want to gain exposure in other companies.

To help with retention we ensure that we offer market-related salaries and benefits and that we provide continuous training opportunities as well as a clear career path. We also give our female employees challenging projects and ensure that we support them.

CREATE A SKILLS PIPELINE OF TALENTED WOMEN

The industry needs to realise that we all have a role to play in attracting and retaining female engineers, and we must think long term. We can't keep saying 'we can't find them' or have a casual approach of appointing them only if they happen to be available.

Companies need to actively focus on creating a skills pipeline of talented women. It's not enough to have universities producing female engineers, companies need to give these women a chance otherwise it will all be in vain.

Targeted recruitment drives are needed where companies go into universities and colleges to find women with high potential and support them through bursaries, training, and development. The industry also needs to work with universities to ensure that the curriculum is relevant and supports industry needs.

ACCESSING EXTERNAL FUNDING

We access SETA funding and discretionary grant funding for our millwright and tool-maker apprenticeship programmes and internal bursaries. We have found accessing funds from the SETA is very easy and the tax incentive for training complements this funding.

The SETA staff are supportive and offer advice where needed. All that is needed to access the funding is to meet the requirements and submit training programmes, however, for some reason we find that other companies don't seem to take advantage of SETA funding.

Companies need to create an environment that enables female engineers to thrive, and women must be supported and coached through their career journeys. Forums where women can talk about their challenges and be supported through them are also important.

> COMPANIES NEED TO **ACTIVELY FOCUS ON CREATING A SKILLS PIPELINE OF TALENTED WOMEN.** IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO HAVE UNIVERSITIES PRODUCING FEMALE ENGINEERS, COMPANIES NEED TO **GIVE THESE WOMEN A CHANCE.**