

BETTS TOWNSEND



Celebrating 20 years

Editorial: Ajuanne Payne

What is essential for investors embarking on some of the biggest construction projects in South Africa? Having a partner that can get the job done, a partner that is one of the top in its field in the country, and one that has a sparkling track record for fast, quality work. Betts Townsend is a company that ticks all these boxes and in the run up to its 20 year anniversary later this year we speak to founder and CEO, Howard Betts, to get his view on the ongoing success of his business.

With two decades of experience under its belt, Betts Townsend is a construction project management company with the proven ability to handle some of the largest retail, commercial, industrial and leisure construction projects in South and Southern Africa.

One of the top three project management companies servicing the SADC region, Betts Townsend is still run by its founder, Howard Betts, and continues to be the go-to partner for the blue chip companies that make up its clientele.

“Betts Townsend was founded in 1995 by myself in response to a need for more competition in the Construction Project Management field in South Africa,” explains Betts. “At that time, there were only three or four companies providing

this service. The predecessors of Redefine, probably one of the biggest property funds in the country, gave us our first job and retained our services, bringing us along as the company became what it is today.”

Boasting repeat business with its biggest client, Redefine, and with a diverse portfolio of large clients of a similar calibre, Betts has seen consistent growth at his company since inception - around 50% every year.

CORE FOCUS

Introducing project management companies as a regular fixture in the construction industry in South Africa in the early 90's was a natural progression for the market there. As a result of the development and growth the country was



experiencing nationally, there was increasing demand for fast-track, efficient construction; and Betts Townsend stepped in to meet that demand.

In charge of ensuring successful completion, Betts Townsend provides turnkey solutions that cover the whole lifecycle of a project, from feasibility assessments, design and budget allocation, to managing suppliers and subcontractors and health and safety.

Betts explains the company's core focus in more detail: "Our core business is construction project management, although we now provide a range of additional services to complement this. We provide this service in the retail, commercial, industrial and leisure sectors.

"Our focus has always been within the Republic of South Africa, but our currency value is now

almost dictating that we look outside of the country and we have set up an office in Nairobi, Kenya which is proving to be a great success. We have 4 offices within South Africa in Durban, Johannesburg, Cape Town and Port Elizabeth and with Kenya starting up only 2 years ago; this is proving to be a profitable move. We are also in the process of looking at setting up in other SADC countries – Botswana being the first."

Betts Townsend has firmly established its reputation as a project management consultancy with the in-house technical proficiency to ensure successful and timely execution of a project. Further expansion into Southern Africa is an organic step for the company and an opportunity to spread its particular brand of South African expertise.



KEY PROJECTS

Betts Townsend has certainly worked hard over the past two decades, the upshot of this being that the company has had the privilege of managing some of the most prestigious construction projects in South Africa, in both the public and private sector.

“You’ve got to grow – if you’re not growing you’re not going anywhere”

“Some of the key projects that we have delivered include the following – Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy, Hemmingways Shopping Centre in East London, Hyde Park Hotel, Baywest Shopping Centre in Port Elizabeth - and that’s just to name a few,” detailed Betts.

The Baywest Shopping Centre, of which

Betts Townsend is the project manager, is set for completion in just one month and is a huge R1.7 billion joint venture between Abacus Asset Management and Billion Property Group.

The much anticipated mall will be the region’s biggest and is expected to generate 3,000 permanent jobs for locals. Construction was commenced in June 2013 and has been handled by the company’s principal project manager, John Townsend, an agent well recognised in the industry as having some of the most extensive experience in managing large-scale retail projects in South Africa.

In just two short years and with the end now very much in sight, the Baywest Shopping Centre is just one example of the complex type of project Betts Townsend is entrusted with.

Reputation is key, and Betts Townsend has been careful to maintain and develop its formidable one over the years, focusing on the development of its staff members and the relationships with its suppliers and clients.

In fact, the company’s focus on its relationships, both within and outside the business, is perhaps its calling card and a key contributor to its continued success in the industry.

PEOPLE POWER

Betts Townsend currently has around 60

permanent staff members spread across its five offices, with employees moving from region to region depending on the type of project and their particular expertise and experience.

“Because of our very stable staff turnover, we’ve got that continuity, that stability”

“With different sectors, we have certain staff members that have had extensive experience in one or two of the fields we cover and who would clearly be the best person for the job in question,” explains Betts. “We undertake industry-specific sponsorships and in fact, two of our staff members are currently on part-time courses to achieve their master’s degrees in construction project management.”

“We’re also a staff owned company - around 50% of the company is in a staff trust, so they see profit share every year. That’s another good reason why we don’t have a high staff turnover. People feel invested in what they’re doing.”

It is this attitude of dedication and investment in company success that Betts has always been keen to foster within Betts Townsend’s corporate culture – never losing sight of the direct correlation between positive staff and positive progression within the business.

Betts explains how the company’s focus



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“Our motto is ‘it can be done’ – anything can be done”

on fostering good employee and client relationships has given it a competitive edge: “Initially, there was not a lot of competition in the market but during the past five or six years, competition has increased. However, we like to differentiate ourselves with our hands-on experience - all our Project Managers were contractors in their early careers.

“We also do not aim to produce piles of paperwork, but rather get to the point and it is our culture to rather ‘pick up the phone’. People rely on emails far too much!”

Betts says that “Our motto is ‘it can be done’ – anything can be done. Because of our very stable staff turnover, we’ve got that continuity,

that stability. It's not only good for the company but it keeps the clients a lot happier.

"We have certain directors who look after certain clients. Some of these joined us as project managers but then as they've grown they've looked after their clients and grown along their own path to directorship."

FURTHER EXPANSION AND GROWTH

"I mean you've got to grow – if you're not growing you're not going anywhere," says Betts; and growth is definitely something the Betts Townsend is investing in. Over the years the company's profits have always been about 10% of turnover, which has recently grown to about R100 million per year and a continued drive towards further growth is key to the company's future.

"Within South Africa definitely we've been going on a big marketing drive," explains Betts, "to get new clients. In our Southern African countries, we're looking at starting a couple of projects outside of our borders, one in Mozambique and one in Botswana – we've set up an office there.

"We've ventured in to east Africa; we set up an office in Nairobi. We deployed one of our directors from here who is running that region, Mike Taylor, who has done very well - he's picked up a lot of work."

One project that marks a new region for Betts Townsend and an area with the potential for further development is Nairobi and The Hub project.

The mixed use 20 acre complex is in the centre of Karen, Nairobi's green suburb, has been developed over two phases and is due to be completed towards the end of 2015. The first phase was the construction of an area featuring retail, offices, medical and a wellness centre and the second phase comprises a hotel, conference centre and residential spaces.

"The Hub in Karen, in Nairobi. That's a new region - we've introduced a different way of construction there which they love," explains Betts. "We've definitely improved their PPE and their OHS health and safety. It's got itself a good name."

Considering the significant growth being experienced across the whole African continent and the subsequent investments in new infrastructure, Betts Townsend can comfortably expect to see an increased demand for their services in the continent and is taking the steps now to ensure they have the presence to service this demand.

"Our plans are to service the East African countries and then get serious about something in

Mauritius, where we have had a registered company for probably 11 years," says Betts.


CONTINUED SUCCESS

With more work on its books for the coming year and projects that are furthering the company's influence in new regions, Betts Townsend has more than one reason to pause and take stock. This year marks a milestone for the company in its 20 year anniversary and plans are brewing for a big bash for its employees and partners, celebrating its continued success, in around September.





"The key to our success obviously begins with our relationships," explains Betts. "We have long standing relationships with blue chip clients and are proud of the repeat business that continues from this.



"We have a happy staff complement and do not have a high staff turnover. In fact, most of them have been here in excess of seven years and some even 17 or 18 years. We strongly believe that our people are our future, and the heart and soul of our company. My door is always open.



"We are flexible and easily adapt to change, and this too has been a contributing factor to our ability to weather changes in a sometimes uncertain market," concludes Betts ●



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