

Press release from Jan de Beer, cell 082 456 3677:

SAPMA slams government apathy about demise of paint technology

Government's apparent lack of concern about the dwindling number of qualified coatings technologists in South Africa is a matter of grave concern, warns Deryck Spence, executive director of the SA Paint Manufacturers Association (SAPMA).

Spence said the coatings industry is plagued by a serious shortage of skills in research and development, exacerbated by the fact that the relatively few paint chemists operating in South Africa are now near retirement age. "Despite this ominous scenario, which has been spelt out to government by SAPMA repeatedly for many years, the training authorities are currently more obsessed with the qualification as paint applicators by the thousands of jobless people," he stated.

Spence said SAPMA fully supported the concept of job-creation at low skills levels but in declining to provide grants for the training of technologists to advance the industry, the training authorities clearly overlook that without technology there would not be paint to generate an income for applicators.

"Coatings technologists are essential. They contribute to the assessment, development, reformulation, quality, maintenance, and enhancement of products through planning, executing, and analysis of experiments. Green building calls for sustainable and non-polluting manufacturing processes as well as products that do not release harmful compounds into the atmosphere or water. Without qualified and experienced technologists, the coatings industry would not have been able to comply with many of the stringent laws now in place the world over."

Spence said paint was often simply regarded as a decorative coating but - through technological research - coatings had contributed revolutionary scientific advancements of global benefit.

"Overseas, paint chemists developed the formulation of a top coat one hundred times thinner than the human hair. When applied to the body of a jet aircraft, for example, the reduction in drag saves millions of dollars in fuel and flight scheduling.

"Technological research in the UK has developed paint that conducts electricity that is now spawning substantial interest from governments as well as the building industry. R&D by paint companies has also led to the development of soundproof paint with immense potential to alter the acoustics and sound properties of any conceivable building. Technology has furthermore produced a coating that offers fire protection because when exposed to high heat from a fire, it forms a char layer that protects the material the paint is exposed to."

Spence added that it has been said that paint chemists, like a maestro conducting an orchestra full of instruments, must manipulate and control many variables down to molecular level. Not only were chemists responsible for creating the right paints once, but also for stabilising them in a way that could be repeated over and over in production.

"In South Africa, SAPMA training of paint technologists has produced dozens of highly qualified individuals, including many young men and women from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. So, by withholding grants for the training of paint chemists, the government is not only stifling technological growth in an essential industry but actually holding back transformation.

“The opportunity for these inspired young people - passionate about careers in coatings research and development - to learn from the few ageing individuals now still holding these posts is rapidly passing. It is a matter of huge concern for all paint and related product manufacturers. There is little time for government to ensure the survival of an economically vital local industry,” Spence warned.

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