



The brighter side of career cyclicity in the mining professions in South Africa

The year 2016 has come and gone and is now history. One of the dark reflections on the mining industry in South Africa in 2016 is the job losses in the wake of continued low commodity prices. The brighter side is that commodity prices seem to have bottomed out and some recovery is starting to show. So, are we likely to witness the industry returning to the high demand for mining professionals as was seen during the boom times just prior to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis?

It is undisputable that jobs in the mining industry are cyclical, with the cycles being led by commodity price cycles. It is estimated that the industry, which contributed around 7% of the country's GDP in the past decade, directly employed about 500 000 people, making the mining sector a significant employer. The total number of people employed directly by the industry declined in 2016 by an estimated 30 000 to 50 000. Commodity price recovery will herald an upswing of employment in the mining industry, and so the cycle repeats itself.

Mining professionals are generally in the fields of mining engineering, mineral processing, metallurgy, geology, and surveying. In order to enter a profession in the mining industry and follow an engineering career, a good mathematics and science education is required when exiting the high school system. It can take close to 10 years before one attains a senior position in the industry, during which time commodity prices may become depressed. So, given the cyclicity of jobs in the sector, is it worth pursuing an engineering career in the mining industry at all?

My opinion is that an engineering career is very rewarding and fulfilling when you consider the exciting and challenging projects and operations one would be exposed to over a lifetime career in mining. It is also very exciting to think about the digital era that our industry is entering and how technically fulfilling our jobs are going to be. There are also the economic rewards of an engineering career. Several surveys have been done comparing the remuneration of engineers in South Africa. Mining jobs top the list. The interesting ones that I have come across are the surveys done on 2016 salaries by MyBroadband and CareerJunction. I urge you to engage with their websites and view their survey reports on the average salaries of engineers in South Africa. These reports are produced to guide South African job seekers and the recruitment industry.

The surveys show some interesting patterns and indicate that a career in mining is highly valued. The reports also note that for anyone seeking to earn a high salary, an engineering degree complemented by a Master of Business Administration (MBA) or Master of Business Leadership (MBL) is a good option. Among the engineering disciplines, the ranking in terms of the average salaries indicates that mining engineers are the highest paid engineers and chemical engineers the lowest. Average salaries falling in the middle are for the other engineering disciplines such as civil, structural, electrical, electronic, industrial, and mechanical engineering. Food for thought if you were doubting your wisdom in having chosen a mining profession for a career! Mining professions have been, are still, and will continue to be a career of choice.

So, although an engineering career in a mining profession may appear risky due to the cyclical nature of the mining business, it is technically fulfilling and financially rewarding. As with the principles of risk and reward, commodity price cycles introduce risk but the remuneration levels are a high enough reward for one to pursue a career in mining. If you thought an engineering career in mining was not such a good choice, I urge you to think again! If you had to advise your child on an engineering career, would you strongly recommend a career in mining? What are your thoughts on your own engineering career that you are following in the mining industry? I urge you to go out and be good ambassadors for the mining professions.

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