

President's Corner



I was recently reminded that it is customary to reflect on the past 12 months in the December Journal.

We live in a beautiful country with a wonderful climate and amongst South Africans who are usually able to laugh at themselves and handle life's challenges. One just needs to tap into social media to see evidence of this. This collective ability to deal with stress was tested to the limit when, early in the year, Covid-19 brought on a level of uncertainty that many of us had not experienced before. It has been a tumultuous year and one that I am sure none of us will ever forget. Ongoing media reports highlighted some of the good, the bad, and the ugly of 2020.

The Good

For the first time in a long while, we saw signs of courageous leadership in South Africa. Despite knowing that our country would have to take a huge economic hit, brave unpopular decisions were taken to make it possible for us to assist those impacted by the virus.

Covid-19 forced us to stress-test our current technologies and the way we structure our businesses. People had to adapt, innovate, and make decisions around change. They quickly realized how easily it is to work differently. Our industry seemed to take Covid-19 in its stride and just carry on, while its employees learned how to operate outside of the office. Many of our members found that they were busier, more productive, and generally very comfortable using the various digital platforms available to them for communicating or holding virtual meetings.

The SAIMM successfully held its first digital Annual General Meeting after having had to rapidly adjust to a new way of operating at the onset of Covid-19. I was impressed at how quickly our staff and members working on the Technical Programmes Committee embraced the challenge and just did what needed to be done to carry on delivering to our membership base.

In fact, this was also true for our country as a whole, where we witnessed how South Africans from all walks of life rallied to keep the wheels turning at our schools, universities, hospitals, and many other institutions. In many ways, the pandemic brought people together, with some like myself spending more time with family as we worked on our homes and exercised together in the garden.

The Bad

The world was not prepared, especially some of the 'first world' countries. At home, the initial five weeks of complete isolation came quickly and unexpectedly. It brought with it both economic and social stress. Routines were disrupted and for many, social isolation was emotionally draining.

We witnessed people having to take salary cuts, suffer job losses, and take on debt just to survive, and for most, it will take a long time to recover. Members also found themselves working longer hours at home while having to look after children, spouses, and the elderly. Overall screen time increased and I expect that the gaming and streaming industries did very well.

Covid-19 exposed the true depth of divisions in South African society as the 'haves' seemed to fare better than the 'have-nots'. The less fortunate appeared to be more exposed to the consequences.

The Ugly

When considering the ugly, three things stood out – American politics, local corruption, and domestic violence. It was unfortunate to see how easily prejudice, uncertainty, and fear were able to polarize society as a consequence of American politics.

Pools of anger, resentment, and desperation during the lockdown revealed the raw wound of domestic violence that exists in our own society. This also highlighted how fragile we are when it comes to managing corruption. I found it difficult to comprehend how easily and quickly corrupt opportunists were able to pounce and take advantage of Covid-19 funding.

President's Corner *(continued)*

Looking forward

We need to remember, though, that we hear only what the media tells us, and should be more discerning in what we choose to believe. While it is good that we are informed by the media, we should regularly ask ourselves what did we not hear? 2020 was hard and we now need to move into 2021. I believe that a positive atmosphere is emerging, with people more optimistic about a brighter future, and a hopefully a vaccine for Covid-19.

We are seeing improvements in the markets, a resurgence in commodity demand, and an uplift in our industry. There is a general increase in interest in projects previously placed on ice.

Persistent guidance by President Ramaphosa is resulting in visible signs of authorities acting against corruption, and positive efforts at Eskom and SARS.

There is general recognition by everyone that things are not going to be the same and that we need to change the way they think about business. The world is now seeing things differently, and this provides a good space for people who want to change. The industry has got off to a good start and our leaders, many of whom are associated with the SAIMM, can accelerate these efforts.

Our members don't need to be holding on to the norms of the past. The fourth industrial revolution, or 4IR, has brought on significant technological progress. Systems have improved, efficiencies are up, and we now need to work harder on developing the human capacity needed for us to simply stay abreast. Let's meet the challenge and continue to innovate. Look at your own individual sphere of influence and consider how you can contribute to the collective efforts of everyone else.

All in all, it has been a difficult and eventful year, and now it is time to recharge. The SAIMM is looking forward to 2021, and I would like to thank all Fellows, Members, the Secretariat, and our Company Affiliates for their continued support of the Institute and its activities. I wish all our members, colleagues, and loved ones a peaceful holiday and trust that you will all have a blessed festive season.

V.G. Duke
President, SAIMM