



I love
this field ...

Onke Ngacu Civil Technician Arcus GIBB

What do you do?

I am a civil technician in the infrastructure/ human settlement division for a big consulting firm in the Eastern Cape that has been around for at least 52 years.

I qualified through NMMU as a technician so I spend most of my time either on site inspecting projects or in the office doing design, presentations or writing reports and attending to client queries and needs. I am also involved in a bit of marketing. On site I normally dress in jeans, t-shirt and helmet to do survey work (checking levels), construction progresses, project management and design.

What is most challenging about your job?

What I mostly find challenging is the pressure we often get from clients. When a client wants something they do not always appreciate how long it takes to compile it and often give unrealistic deadlines. Meeting those deadlines is not always easy and sometimes you go without sleep for nights in a row. Recently, at three months pregnant, I had to work through the night, present my document to the client, effect the changes and re-submit the same day. You also have the challenge of bringing in new jobs.

Describe a typical day

We have the luxury of flexi-time, which means I come into the office anytime before 9am and leave anytime after 4pm, as long as I have worked my full eight hours. I work for a great company! On a good day I will arrive at the office at 8am with no clients

or contractors to meet. Then I head off to the site to check the progress and monitor the work. On my return, I will continue with design work or administration of projects. No one warns technical people about the amount of time you will spend dealing with people, paper work and travelling! There are also meetings and presentations to attend to either with the client or internally in your specific company.

What advice would you give to women entering a male-dominated career environment?

I have found that women have more pressure to constantly prove themselves. Men still undermine our capability as women. Of course your age and experience have a large impact on how seriously they take you. I love this field and cannot imagine any other suitable position for me. However, men still think it is just their field. According to surveys, even the salary structures are such that men are normally paid more in this field than women.

What do you do when you are not at work?

I am a single mother of one and expecting another in a few weeks so when I am not studying towards my urban engineering BTech qualification, I spend time with my son. I also enjoy walking, reading and writing. I have started enjoying the wonders of Google. I spend quite a lot of time at night, when everyone has gone to bed, searching just about anything and everything. I love home decor, Christian articles on life generally and keeping up to date with South African news.

What characteristics and qualifications do you need for your current position?

The minimum qualification is a diploma in civil engineering.

Most companies will often do a psychometric test to see which side of the brain you use ... unfortunately most of the firm engineers lack social skills but are good planners.

But above all, one needs to be participative, resilient, creative, have an inquisitive mind, listen and focus. Networking is important as sometimes you need the added assistance of outsiders to seek solutions.

What are your goals for the future?

I would like to be a project manager in my company. Hopefully someday, I will own my own business and use the skills I have picked up over the years either in the public service, my own construction company or as a consultant.

What is it like being a female in a typically male dominated environment?

Men do not understand things such as pregnancy, maternity leave and safety on site. This is testing at times.

You have to constantly prove your capabilities.

If you weren't in your particular career what would you be?

I do not see myself doing something completely different. I could possibly be a stay-at-home mom running small businesses such as selling exclusive clothing. I would also enjoy consulting in this field at my own pace.





... surprise them by stealth!

Sharna Hopewell

Junior Engineer
Arcus Gibb

What do you do?

I am a civil engineer with Arcus GIBB (Pty) Ltd. I am employed in the human settlements services division, and am currently working for the sanitation department. At the moment my work revolves around bulk outfall sewers and wastewater treatment works. Prior to this, I spent some time in the Water Department working on rural water supply.

In general, my work includes tasks such as preparing tender documentation and calculating quantities for the schedules of quantities. Where necessary, I research and investigate design issues. I prepare design calculations, and collate data for use in permit applications in collaboration with our environmental services division. There is always project-related administration, and one has to liaise with various authorities and other service providers.

As an engineer, one must be able to produce drawings in order to communicate the design to other parties. I initially spent a number of years preparing drawings - for tender, construction or reports. As you progress in your career, this task is passed on to juniors, but I still control drawing registers and the allocation of drawing numbers.

What is most challenging about your job?

I am still learning, so I have to request help on new tasks. Senior engineers are not always able to afford juniors the time we actually need, which is frustrating for both parties. One has to learn quickly and move on, as there are always deadlines to meet. Managing your time becomes more challenging as the workload increases.

Describe a typical day

At the moment I am office-based. I deal with incoming emails and calls, and work on various designs. During the construction phase of a project it is necessary to liaise with the resident engineers on site. This may involve investigating certain issues, performing quick calculations, discussing the matter with more senior engineers and reporting back to the resident engineers. Often, the day does not play out as planned - you need to "roll with the punches"!

What advice would you give to women entering a male-dominated career environment?

As long as women make gender an issue, it will remain an issue! Forget about it - get on with your career! Stay true to yourself in all dealings with others. If you really are worth that which you believe yourself to be, you will be noticed and afforded opportunities. There's no need to force your way - surprise them by stealth!

What do you do when you are not at work?

I do some voluntary first aid duties, but that's about all at this stage. I have been a little too busy to fit hobbies into my schedule recently.

What characteristics and qualifications do you need for your current position?

In terms of qualifications, you must hold a degree in civil engineering - attained at an ECSA-accredited university. Characteristics such as personal integrity and willingness to take responsibility for your decisions are vital. You must work well in a team, but be self-sufficient and able to work alone and unsupervised.

What are your goals for the future?

I am working towards obtaining my professional engineer status. I'd like to study further once I have decided on a specific career path. Civil engineering is such a broad career - it offers so many different options and opportunities. I have not explored enough of these yet to settle on a specific area of interest.

What is it like being a female in a typically male dominated environment?

Well, you become accustomed to being the only female at meetings, courses and presentations. Jokes aside - it's not a big deal. As I stated, if you are competent, there's nothing stopping you from tackling any challenge. I have found that women who constantly make gender an issue in the work place usually have a chip on their shoulders, or are not quite up to the standard of their peers. There are many competent female engineers who are enjoying their careers, and who are making a difference in the lives of the people in the communities in which they work.

If you weren't in your particular career what would you be?

It would have to be something in the medical, analytical or investigative fields. I would probably have gone into forensic pathology.

