

Heritage of technical competence and innovation

Rocla, a company that manufactures precast concrete infrastructural products through an extensive network of factories throughout South Africa, Namibia and Botswana, has the advantage that it has a long history in the precast field. The company uses this heritage with innovation to stay ahead of competitors. *Wilhelm du Plessis* spoke to Craig Waterson, Rocla's sales and marketing director.



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What is Rocla's technical expertise capacity, i.e. how are new products researched, designed and developed?

There are two ways: response to customer requests (some of these products then become standard products) and through the ongoing introduction of new products.

Rocla is in a fortunate position to have a heritage of over 90 years. Over this time it has built up a technical competency which is difficult to match. The company has people who have come through the ranks and our technical department is strong. We get many requests from customers to make customised products, for example we are currently manufacturing permanent concrete shutters for Eskom at our Newcastle factory. This is an example of special products that are developed by our technical team which includes professional engineers.

We recruited a sales engineer towards the end of last year – Justin Kretzmar – who is a civil engineer. He has been tasked to review the international precast market and find products that are not manufactured locally. Products that will enhance the precast experience in South Africa are then introduced here. They include barriers, precast wing walls and head walls which are traditionally cast in situ (internationally these are done precast) and Rocla has bought a license for a precast security wall and retaining wall system which is an A-frame concrete block called Alpha Bloc. We believe that a product such as rainwater harvesting tanks that are used in dry countries as a matter of course has a role locally.

Rocla has developed a mobile plant concept which enables the manufacturing of products on site. How does this work?

Most of the material that one requires for concrete pipes is available locally. What is normally

missing locally is the expertise. Rocla, through its long heritage, can transplant this intellectual capital fairly easily. We transfer the equipment to the site where the products are needed and then deploy one of our experts who has the intellectual capital or ability to do the job, or to run the job as a foreman. He recruits local labour, local materials, and uses Rocla's tried and tested policies and procedures.

How are standards maintained on a mobile site?

The big risk with manufacturing inferior products when using a mobile plant is that the Rocla brand is still associated with it. This risk is managed by carefully documenting all the products: each product has a design which includes the mix design, the steel required, etc. In addition the actual procedures and the quality assurance measures (which include making test cubes of the concrete and various important parameters), are strictly adhered to. This information needs to be sent back to our office for audit purposes – so in short – even though it is off site, we use and maintain our normal standards.

How are standards maintained in your factories? What certifications do you adhere to?

We have internal processes which need to be followed and these are audited by our technical and quality assurance teams. In addition, Rocla is ISO 9001/2000 certified and has the applicable SANS or SABS mark on the bulk of its products. Some products are also SABS approved, but not every precast product has an applicable SANS or SABS standard.

Your website states that Rocla 'embraces and is committed to the Total Quality Management' – briefly explain this.

Often people regard quality as just being the end product. We regard this as going far beyond that. 'Total Quality management' refers to everything we do. It includes our production processes and the end product; also administrative functions, sound corporate governance, and financial procedures. The company has a sophisticated Quality Management System, which is considered key to all that the company stands for. The system is continually monitored and upgraded to ensure its effectiveness.

What is Rocla's unique selling points?

We believe that we are precast concrete engineers ... not merely precasters: Rocla is a specialist in the field of precast concrete as we focus on the engineering aspects as well as the production side in which we have vast experience. In terms of our brand we are able to satisfy the customer's needs in a cost effective and reliable manner.

Directly related to this is our new pay-off line: Our difference is concrete. We do believe that our difference is tangible – it is genuine because of our track record and heritage, but also our understanding of concrete. We have a fantastic national footprint which enables us to deliver anywhere in the country and thereby reduce the inefficiencies of transport.

The optimising of cement and concrete is where we can outperform competitors. The products we produce are used in a way which provides the longevity solution that concrete provides. Often concrete (specifically in road application) is regarded as an expensive solution, but if you take the life cycle into account it becomes a viable solution.

Describe Rocla's approach to procurement?

We use an approach which is a combination centralised and decentralised. As Rocla has a very wide footprint, it often has to procure locally. However, we have a centralised procurement department for big ticket items to optimise procurement. Rocla subscribes to the BBBEE philosophy which requires suppliers that comply with this legislation.

Rocla's operating philosophy lists 'innovation' as one of the five core elements. How is innovation in Rocla's product offering maintained?

We see innovation as going beyond just the product offering. We believe that the only way a company can stay ahead of its opposition is to learn faster than them – it is the only real and competitive advantage. There are 19 manufacturers of precast concrete products for infrastructure in South Africa – all of which are potential competitors. Not all of them are national, but there are a few direct competitors that make exactly the same products as we do.

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