

Patience is key, says Bartlett Construction's Wayne Bartlett

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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As part of our #LockdownLessons series, Bizcommunity is reaching out to South Africa's top industry players to share their experience of the current Covid-19 crisis, how their organisations are navigating these unusual times, where the challenges and opportunities lie, and their industry outlook for the near future.

We chatted to Wayne Bartlett, director for Bartlett Construction, to get his take.



Wayne Bartlett, director for Bartlett Construction

■ **What was your initial response to the crisis/lockdown and has your experience of it been different to what you expected?**

Wayne Bartlett: Prior to the lockdown, we already suspected that some sort of drastic action from the government was going to be taken. This was based on what was already happening in other countries that were worse affected so the lockdown wasn't a real shock to us. The experience has been fairly consistent with how we thought it would be. We already knew that all our current projects would come to a halt and that new projects would be postponed until the uncertainty eased. What we didn't expect was the cancellation of current ongoing projects. This came as a shock to us and is adding even more pressure on our organisation and industry as a whole.

■ **Comment on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on your organisation or economy as a whole.**

Bartlett: With all the current projects suspended, our organisation, like many others have had no income during this pandemic. This places immense pressure on construction companies as they rely on turnover to pay for the high overhead costs of a labour intensive organisation. This effect will be felt by most companies in the industry and, unfortunately, we feel that this is going to lead to many job losses for companies that cannot afford to keep paying these expenses with no income. With many projects being postponed and cancelled, the prospect of future projects for the year 2020 remains very weak so the industry is going to feel the negative impact of this pandemic for months to come.



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How is your organisation responding to the crisis?

Bartlett: Currently, we are focusing on keeping our costs down to a minimum while still running a productive company. We are fortunate enough to also be involved in the property industry and while this sector has also been affected by the lockdown, it is one part of our business that has really been able to assist the group as a whole.

Comment on the challenges and opportunities.

Bartlett: The challenges we currently face are substantial in that the market for 2020 looks very bleak. The construction industry was already suffering prior to this pandemic so the possibility of many projects taking off in the near future are unlikely. That being said, the situation will force us to become more streamlined and efficient. This will be a time that we can engage with our staff and brainstorm ideas that will drive the company to operate on a new level which will inevitably allow us to become better contractors that will offer more value to our clients in the future.



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How has the lockdown affected your staff? / What temporary HR policies have you put in place regarding remote working, health & safety, etc.?

Bartlett: The construction industry already has very strict health and safety procedures in place which will work hand in hand with the new regulations relating to Covid-19. Our health and safety department have been working through this lockdown to ensure the current procedures align with the Covid-19 regulations. Further to this, new procedures such as splitting up teams on site, staggering works hours, additional wash areas and on-site education sessions are currently being worked on so that they can be implemented when returning to work.

In terms of remote working, all our managerial and office staff are currently working from home. Unfortunately, our sector requires us to physically be on site in order to build, which means that roughly 90% of our staff (site staff) are at home with very little to do. We have, however, been actively keeping them involved in drawing up the new health and safety procedures during this time.

How are you navigating 'physical distancing' while keeping your team close-knit and aligned?

Bartlett: Fortunately, technology has been a big plus in this case and has resulted in us being able to run the entire admin side of the business from home. This has been a big learning curve for many of the managers in the company who have become accustomed to thinking that one needs to physically be in the office to carry out a full day's work.



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How have you had to change the way you operate?

Bartlett: This pandemic has forced many of our employees to work remotely whereby we have also been conducting video

conferencing calls for meetings. This will definitely influence the company to reduce the amount of office meetings which result in many of our employees travelling from site to attend. Instead, many of the meetings will be held remotely, thus saving time and money in the process.

I think there will also be an opportunity to allow certain employees to either work from home some days or to work flexi-time. This again will save on costs and time.

▀ **Any trends you've seen emerge as a result of the crisis?**

Bartlett: The obviously trend that we have noticed is the rise in sales and prices in the PPE sector. Most of our suppliers and subcontractors have a full range of new PPE and hygiene equipment that they are distributing in the construction sector as well as other sectors.



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▀ **Your key message to those in the sector?**

Bartlett: Patience is key. The negative impact of this pandemic will be felt long after the lockdown is lifted but if they can use this time to better their processes, they will have a significant advantage when the sector improves.

▀ **What do you predict the next six months will be like?**

Bartlett: I wish I could say we are looking forward to the next six months but the reality is that it is going to be extremely tough. I feel that we will only start coming back to normal 12 months after the lockdown is lifted and even then it will not be at the levels it was before the pandemic.

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