

# Driving quality in local shoe manufacturing

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With an eye for production efficiency and improving supply chain processes, Muhammad Ajmal Khan's career in the shoe manufacturing industry has seen him work in all corners of the factory floor, and - due to Bata's global presence - he's gained experience in just about all corners of the world.



Walking through the corridors of the Bata South Africa factory in the rural area of Loskop, southern Drakensberg in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, he is affectionately referred to as 'mkhulu', a local reference to 'one of rank' or 'old one'.

The Bata Loskop factory is the proud local manufacturer of some of SA's best loved shoes, including quality leather school shoe range Toughes, Tomy Takkies and the safety shoe range, Bata Industrials.

“ Bata is set for growth, said Khan, and the factory is key. ”

Khan takes great responsibility in his official title of factory manager/production manager at the factory, and unofficial title of 'Mkhulu', using his 28 years of experience working at various Bata offices and factories around the world, to steer the SA factory where he maintains efficient processes, while ensuring the highest quality standards in shoes for the Africa and Middle East markets.

Khan's eye for processes and systems was sought after by Bata. In 1998, he was brought into their rubber factory in Bata Pakistan as a superintendent tasked with modernising the factory with the latest machinery and conveyor belt concepts to improve efficiency and quality standards, rising to international standards and demand.

His excellent leadership was recognised by Bata who selected him for a top-tier executive course in Bata production, Prodmanco. His Bata appointments in various countries gave him insight into all levels of production, markets and business operations.

At Bata South Africa, his expertise has led to positive changes.

“My role in Bata is to manage production in supply chain and manufacturing of shoes according to the right quality, the right quantity, at the right cost and delivered at the right time. I must always ensure this while maintaining harmonious and satisfying working conditions,” said Khan, who has exposure at different sister companies of Bata branches in Kenya, Indonesia, Thailand, China, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

This is not an easy feat. At the Loskop factory, it’s a demanding year-round operation, with added responsibilities of employee management, community-focused social responsibility initiatives, and labour and economic pressures.



Prior to being assigned to Loskop, Khan was tasked with reviving the Pakistan factory in Maraka, Lahore, one of the country’s biggest economic hubs. There, the factory was on the verge of closure, but within three years Khan and his team revived it into a profitable unit and ramped up manufacturing.

“I was given the title of 'Mr Revivor' there. I then came to Loskop, where the factory needed tighter operational controls. With the help of the Loskop production team and wonderful cooperation from operators, we set things on the right path,” said Khan.

Khan also navigated the factory through the impact of Covid-19 and the 2021 KZN civil unrest. During the unrest, Khan and the team heard of threats to loot and burn their factory, but employees rallied together and kept watch overnight in freezing temperatures to safeguard the factory. Their actions won them a special global Bata Award and recognition among their peers around the world.

Leveraging his skill in adopting and implementing change, Khan is currently focused on Bata South Africa’s five-year growth strategy.

“Under the leadership of Michael Wyatt, Bata South Africa country manager, and Faisal Sabzwari, Bata Group’s president for Africa & Middle East, we have embarked on new endeavours from 2023 to 2027. We’ve started working closely with our regional sister companies to share best practices so we can grow into new markets,” he said.

Bata is set for growth, said Khan, and the factory is key.

“All our shoes are manufactured by our hard-working women in Loskop who produce them with passion. I am very thankful to them, and all staff members for the best cooperation. The one thing that gets us through every day here at the factory, is knowing that we work as a family. We support each other, we take care of each other, and we aim to make our factory an example of the great family legacy that the Bata family began in 1894,” said Khan.

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