

Q&A with Kate Roper of Aurecon

 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 Kate Roper, client director, health and education at Aurecon to get her take.



Kate Roper, client director, health and education, at Aurecon

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

Kate Roper: My initial response to the lockdown rumors was to make sure that my family was all in the same location so that we could be together under lockdown. My second response was to feel extremely proud to be South African, in a country that could acknowledge and accept reality, move beyond denial and make decisions fast.

Our experience of lockdown has been somewhat different to the way I expected it to be: everybody reports that they're extremely busy, we're more productive, we've all gained the time that we used to spend commuting, and in many people the crisis has triggered creative thinking and dedication to working together to solve the problems. Personally, I'm finding the lockdown period to be quite inspiring and enjoying meeting other focused contributors.

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

Roper: The Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on our company. We are active in the construction industry from strategic planning, infrastructure advisory, through program planning, working on capital project and program budgets, right the way through to scoping, design and implementation of projects and then beyond the projects onto long-term asset management. So Covid-19 and the lockdown have impacted on every aspect of this work.

The economy has been very negatively affected internationally and within South Africa. It's easy to become depressed about this and the more TV I watched, the more worried I became. In all honesty, all we can do is accept the reality and move on to thinking about smart solutions.



■ *How is your company responding to the crisis?*

Roper: The biggest change has been the shutdown of construction sites where we are overseeing the work of contractors to make sure that delivery is up to quality standards. On the few sites that have not shutdown, life has been more complicated as work must continue with extra safety measures: we're delivering water and hospital projects that are considered essential for the Covid-19 response. As we all know, hand washing is the heart of personal hygiene and preventing acquiring the virus.

The rest of the company have been working from home. We have very quickly adapted to working online, there's been fast adoption of Skype for Business, Teams and Zoom, depending who the audience are and the strength of our internet connections. The company was quick to enhance connectivity and people quickly took their computer equipment home to be able to work fast and more efficiently.

Surprisingly, we find that productivity is extremely high, people are very self-motivated and there is a broad acceptance that working from home might be quite a good solution going forward beyond the Covid-19 pandemic.

Think tanks are looking at life post Covid-19, both for internal use and to assist our clients to cope with the impact. We have implemented additional health and safety measures. There are so many ways that we can leapfrog our local economy, using digital solutions, new methods of working and new technologies, to change consumer behaviour, to move into the internet era, to boost local manufacturing and to position South African industry better for the post Covid-19 era.

■ *Comment on the challenges and opportunities.*

Roper: The challenges are many, including keeping up with the emerging research on Covid-19: what is it, what are the real impacts, how do we avoid getting it, when will we go back to work, how safe are we, how do we keep our loved ones safe, and what about income?

In addition to that, the spill over into the local and international economy provide major challenges not just for the construction industry, but in every aspect of our middle-income economy. The impact of any crisis is felt more deeply in poor and vulnerable communities and we must make every effort as a country to support the poor and vulnerable to avoid disaster.

Opportunities relate, therefore, to coping as a continent during and after the Covid-19 epidemic.

We need to think about the transformed face of everything we do: going to the shops will not be the same again, crossing a border will not be the same again, we will not behave in taxi ranks and bus stations and railway stations in the way that we used to behave, our meetings will look different, mines, factories and offices will not function in the old ways. The main opportunity provided by Covid-19 is for us all to think more creatively about the future and develop common solutions.



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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.?***

Roper: All our staff have been deeply affected by the lockdown. The company as a whole is working from home which means that everybody had to rapidly adopt day-to-day use of new technology. An additional challenge for many is trying to work from home with the help of children, babies, dogs who want to go for walks, cats who like to sit on the computer.

We've all had to move away from our daily routines, the inability to exercise, visit older relatives, pick up groceries, socialise.

Aurecon/Zutari has been very proactive in helping staff to deal with the psychosocial impact of lockdown: we have a supportive culture, each of us makes an effort to contact people and to engage in our work relationships in a positive way. The HR policies are quite fundamentally different. We have all agreed to salary cuts in order to retain the skills base and knowledge base within the company. This provides extra stress to everybody in the company but by pulling together, we will come out of this crisis more successfully.

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

Roper: When you work from home, physical distancing is easier. However, we all miss those social interactions on the staircase, in the lift, and at the tuck shop. It is more difficult to keep your team close-knit and aligned. It takes more discipline to arrange an online meeting or call someone to maintain the online relationship. It was easier to pop past the colleague's desk! We're introducing the use of Kanban and scrums to focus team efforts, and moving these onto online platforms.

Our clients are experiencing the same big changes as we are. Perhaps we have even more in common? And there are many ways that we can help our clients overcome those big problems.

■ ***How have you had to change the way you work?***

Roper: Knowledge and expertise, people and teams, systems and processes are cornerstones of our ability to solve complex challenges and help our clients. None of this has changed and we are able to continue work in these difficult circumstances.



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■ ***Has this global crisis changed your view of the future of the industry in any way?***

Roper: The economy was under strain before the Covid-19 crisis. We now see deeper challenges emerging in the global

economy. As the construction industry is quick to respond to economic up turns and downturns, the next few months are likely to be extremely difficult in the construction industry.

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

Roper: Three key trends have emerged:

- Firstly, very rapid adoption of technology and a very rapid move to the world of virtual work;
- Secondly, enhanced cooperation between the public sector and the private sector and a joint focus on problem solving; and
- Thirdly, increased social cohesion and consensus that we have to act together.

▣ *Your key message to those in the construction?*

Roper: In the construction industry we are all action oriented. There will be delays and setbacks, the industry will be negatively impacted by the economic downturn. But those projects will eventually be completed, there is support available for businesses and the economy. We need to put our heads together, hearts and minds, to position the industry to survive Covid-19 and to position for the recovery.



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

Roper: The next six months, we believe, will be varied and interesting. We will be required to adapt quickly to changing circumstances. Imagine an infection hotspot emerging in a local community: teams will have to converge very quickly on solutions to protect that community. The hotspots we see in China move from place to place: things go quiet, then infections resurge, only to repeat again.

I would expect we will become more responsive to change. I hope that people will collaborate better especially between the private sector and public sector so that we help each other more.

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