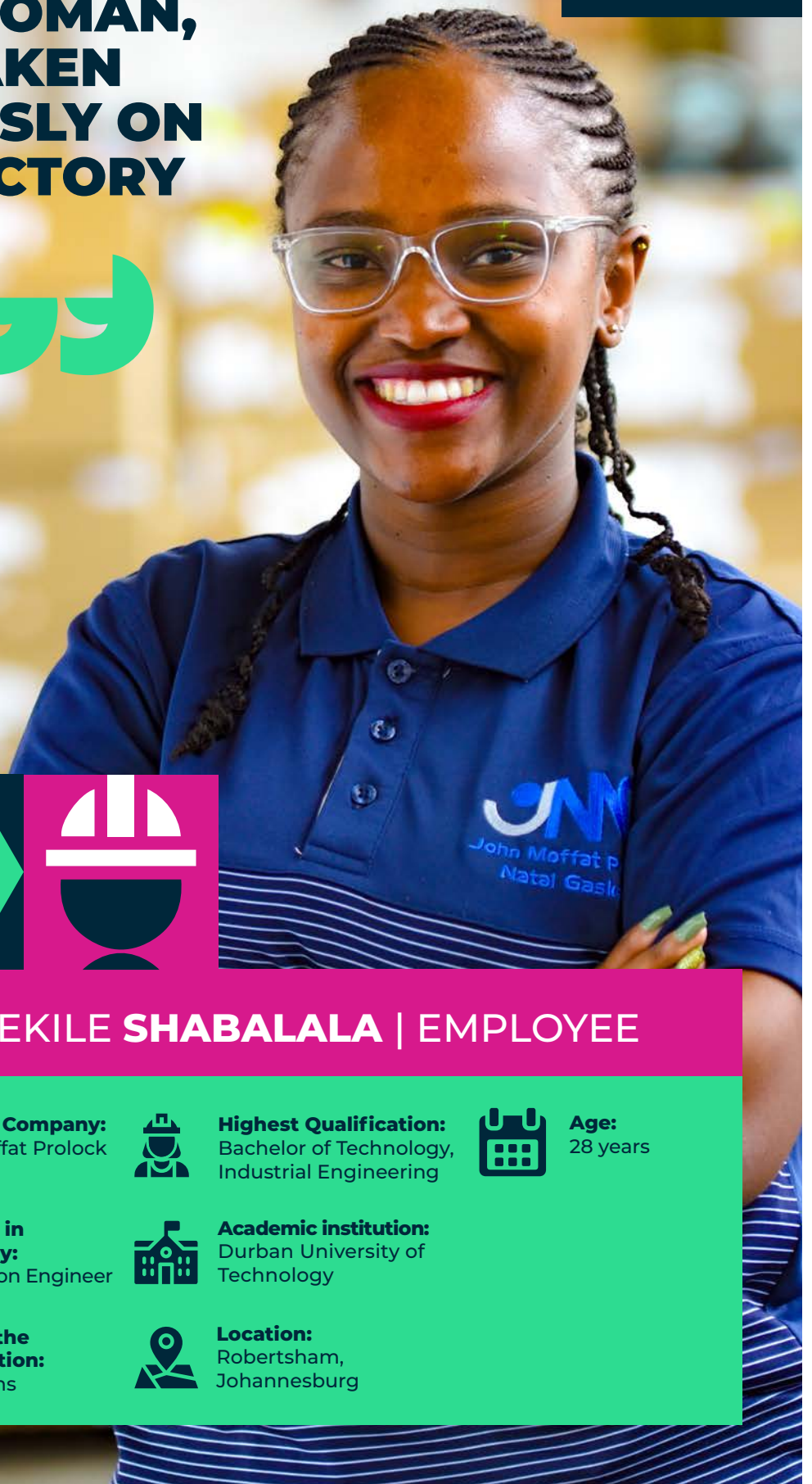




AS A WOMAN, I AM TAKEN SERIOUSLY ON THE FACTORY FLOOR



BONGEKILE SHABALALA | EMPLOYEE



Name of Company:
John Moffat Prolock



Highest Qualification:
Bachelor of Technology,
Industrial Engineering



Age:
28 years



Position in Company:
Production Engineer



Academic institution:
Durban University of
Technology



Years in the organisation:
Six Months



Location:
Robertsham,
Johannesburg





AS A MAN, YOU JUST NEED TO DO YOUR JOB, BUT AS A WOMAN, THERE IS RESISTANCE, AND YOU HAVE TO PROVE YOU ARE GOOD AT YOUR JOB BEFORE THEY RESPECT YOU



I GREW UP IN AN ENGINEERING ENVIRONMENT

My father was a plant manager – we often went to work with him, and I developed a love for mechanical engineering through interacting with the people in the factory. When I finished matric, I applied to the Durban University of Technology and for funds from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). I wanted to study mechanical engineering, but I struggled to get together the registration fees. I had to register late, by which time the course was already full, so the university advised me to study industrial engineering for six months and then switch to mechanical engineering.

I was a bit unhappy about this because I didn't know anything about industrial engineering, but I quickly began to love it and realised I wanted to continue. I enjoyed the combination of electrical and mechanical engineering and business management. I also realised that industrial engineering had more job opportunities and options for departments to go into. I completed my diploma with a couple of distinctions and immediately enrolled for my Bachelor of Technology (BTech) in Industrial Engineering. I had my daughter in the same year. It was a difficult time, but I managed to complete my studies.

My first job was in-service training as an industrial engineering trainee. It was all about learning the basics and applying what we studied in the actual work environment. I then moved up to junior industrial engineer where for the first time I was no longer being directly supervised. I was on a two-year contract and when that ended, I got another contract as an industrial engineer in the automotive industry. That company did not have the budget to offer me a permanent position and I felt that I needed stability, so I moved to a permanent position at a sister company.

After only five months, my previous bosses asked me to come back as their projects were not going according to plan. I went back as an industrial engineering supervisor where I supervised about six industrial engineers. I was put into a development programme, and we rotated through different plants with six months at each plant under the supervision of a production manager. We were trained and groomed and after completing the programme, I was placed in an E-coating and Powder-coating plant as a production manager, the first female production manager at that company.

It was a challenge because it was a male dominated plant, and all eyes were on me as a woman. It was always about proving myself. I stayed as production manager for three years and then six months ago I came to my current company as a production engineer. I like that this company is still growing as it gives me an opportunity to grow faster and create a name for myself. I am also studying towards a master's in engineering.

I HAD TO GROW UP FASTER THAN EXPECTED

There I was, newly enrolled in a BTech, with a new baby, my mother was miles away from me, and no father. Even though my partner and sisters were there for me, the absence of my parent's presence was greatly felt. These big responsibilities made me realise I would have to change and make sacrifices if I wanted to excel.

As a black woman, I have always had to push and work hard. If there is something I haven't done before, I push myself until I am able to do it. This motivation is also tied to my background. If you come from a rural background, you always push yourself because you have people back home relying on you. I have my mother to look after I help my sisters when they need help.

IT FELT LIKE EVERYTHING CHANGED WHEN I MOVED TO MANAGEMENT LEVEL

As a manager, suddenly it's not only about engineering and sitting in front of your computer doing calculations. It's about interacting with people, dealing with customers, making sure the workforce is happy, and addressing challenges in a calm way. It was a big adjustment as I was used to having someone above me making the final decision, and now I had to make the final decision.

I think I've got this far because I give my everything to every task. I am doing my master's and have my daughter to look after, but if I am given a task, I will never say that I cannot do it, or I don't have time.

I do not hide the fact that I work hard because people need to know that if you want to get to this position, you need to work hard and make sacrifices.

RESISTANCE FROM BOTH MEN AND WOMEN

Being a female manager in this industry can be challenging. As a man, you just need to do your job, but as a woman, there is resistance, and you have to prove you are good at your job before they respect you. I don't think this is unique to this industry, and it isn't only the men who cause problems for women. As black women we tend to look down on each other and put up resistance if we have to report to other black women. It isn't a problem with the industry, it is the culture we are raised in where the woman is below, and the man is above.

5 Lessons that I have learnt:

- 1 You need to make sacrifices for success
- 2 Don't make excuses, give your all to every task
- 3 Don't look down on other women based on their race, culture or experience
- 4 Don't stop learning, there's always room for growth
- 5 Treat people with respect even when you are in a managerial position

Both men and women are comfortable reporting into a young, inexperienced man, but when I come along, a black woman studying a master's and with eight years of experience, they will give me a hard time. I am fortunate that in my current company I have had it easy. Perhaps the previous female employee I replaced paved the way for me, but in just six months I am taken seriously on the factory floor. I think it's also the way I interact with people, I treat people with respect, and I don't see myself as superior just because I am in a managerial position.



I THINK I'VE GOT THIS FAR BECAUSE I GIVE MY EVERYTHING TO EVERY TASK.

