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Epiroc and Elf Drilling – keeping the finger on the mining pulse

Epiroc has once again rocked the local mining space with a landmark sale of the first BenchREMOTE in South Africa to key customer, Elf Drilling. The innovative BenchREMOTE is an advanced monitoring system, which can be linked to up to three SmartROCs and is ideal for removing the operator from the danger area, taking him away from the noise and dust and drilling in hazardous areas near the high wall, thereby contributing to elevated safety levels.

Elf Drilling, since its inception three decades ago, has been a frontrunner in drilling, sampling and service for the Northern Cape mining industry. Operating as a complementary team, Faghmi Cader, Eduard and Lizelle Mostert are leading Elf Drilling into the new age of automation drilling. Consisting of a regional office in Kathu, a head office in Kimberly and a workshop in Kuruman and supported by a team of 145 employees, the company boasts extensive experience across South Africa, as well as in Namibia and Angola. Elf Drilling is also a manganese specialist and operates on two of the largest manganese mines in the Northern Cape. Featuring an Epiroc fleet of 25 machines, Elf Drilling procured its first FlexiROC D65 in 2012, and more recently received delivery of two SmartROC D65s, together with the BenchREMOTE in Q4 2018.

The rock-solid relationship between Epiroc and Elf Drilling began seventeen years ago when Eduard operated on a zinc mine in Namibia using Atlas Copco air compressors. There Eduard met Cobus Engelbrecht from Atlas Copco who introduced him to the then Atlas Copco L8 drill rig. “When I first saw this machine I was highly impressed by its compactness, flexibility and maneuverability,” states Eduard. “But what really stood out for me was the machine’s automated rod handling capability which takes safety to the next level. In addition to reducing the risk of manual errors, operators are kept away from potential risk areas. The auto-rod handling function also minimises wear on the rig as well as on consumables.”

From here on the relationship between the two companies grew steadily. When Mining & Rock Excavation Technique branched off from Atlas Copco to become Epiroc, the connection with Elf Drilling remained unaffected. “It was business as usual between Elf Drilling and the Epiroc team of Hedley Birnie, Kevin Govender and Cobus Engelbrecht,” affirms Eduard.

The mining industry is safety-driven and Elf Drilling has aligned itself to this focus by procuring the state-of-the-art BenchREMOTE. Following an incident in which a machine fell over due to operator error, fortunately not resulting in injuries but incurring costly machine damage, the company adopted an even more aggressive preventative approach by utilising the BenchREMOTE.

This technologically advanced machine comprises of premium quality components such as SR and PTZ cameras that enable operators to conveniently monitor progress from the comfort of a FOPS/ROPS approved cabin, situated 100m away within the line of sight. “This feature converts the SmartROC into a reliable, low-maintenance partner on the bench, and enables substantially improved operational and safety efficiencies,” notes Hedley Birnie, Business Line Manager of Surface & Exploration Drilling at Epiroc.

The single BenchREMOTE’s capability to operate up to three SmartROC drill rigs enhances productivity for the lowest possible total cost of ownership. Further adding to its impressive features, the BenchREMOTE’s memory can store information on up to ten drill rigs, so that when required the machine can be moved from one block or area to another, and control the rigs in each respective area. The BenchREMOTE will assist in the prevention of machine abuse, and so training is of vital importance. Epiroc will provide Elf Drilling with a three-week training course on the BenchREMOTE and all training is on-going as refresher courses are essential for customers to keep up with the latest technologies.

Elf Drilling also utilises a web-based on-board reporting system from Epiroc called CERTIQ to monitor operator activities and productivity as well as machine health. This innovative monitoring system allows customer to remotely log in to view their fleet through a smart mobile device.

Training and local community development is close to the heart of Elf Drilling. “We are passionate about the upliftment and growth of our community and that is why we predominantly employ local people,” says Faghmi. “The hiring of local talent means that the community is given job opportunities and employees do not incur exorbitant commuting costs. Training is also essential in order to ensure that the drilling machines are correctly operated and utilised to their full potential.” Faghmi points out however that the lack of training facilities i.e. schools, technical colleges and universities is forcing contractors to source operators from outside the Northern Cape.

Recognising this shortfall, Elf Drilling plans to open a training facility within the next year that will benefit both internal and external resources. The company has also invested in a FlexiROC simulator with plans to purchase a simulator for SmartROC. This lucrative investment will enable Elf Drilling to choose their very own well-trained operators from the cream of the crop to operate their Epiroc machines. Their plan is to take an unskilled person with no tertiary education through the training process and then bring them into the company. Addressing the challenges around gaining next-level operator training due to red tape and high costs, Elf Drilling is collaborating with the Epiroc Academy who will provide crucial train-the-trainer courses.

With its focus on drilling rather than on machine repair, Elf Drilling opened a workshop in Kuruman – Kalaghadi Engineering Hydraulics (KEH). This move has empowered the company’s mechanics who receive regular training from Epiroc.

Aftermarket service is crucial to sustaining machine health and performance. “It’s clear that Epiroc considers after-market to be as important as the quality of their machines, and I have seen their after-market offering constantly improve,” notes Faghmi. “That is the reason why Epiroc is the preferred mining partner for Elf Drilling as their performance is unmatched.” Elf Drilling receives quick and seamless financing from Epiroc Financial Services, Sweden, with quick delivery of machines.

Elf Drilling lauds the Epiroc team for their professionalism and superior customer service as they are always approachable and just a phone call away. Faghmi adds that as they can always rely on Epiroc it assists them to maintain a sterling reputation, which Faghmi points out, in a small town means everything. “There is no doubt that Epiroc machines give us the competitive edge and we can say without hesitation that few drilling companies can match us.”

Wrapping up Hedley says that Elf Drilling has walked a long way on a short road and has one of the best maintained drilling fleets in the industry. “Team Faghmi, Eduard and Lizelle work as a well-oiled machine and lines of communication between the two companies are always open. We consider our customers as our partners and stand by them as much as they stand by us. We will never hesitate to free up any resource to come to their assistance,” concludes Hedley.

Elf Drilling’s purchase of the first BenchREMOTE in South Africa as well as the two SmartROCs was commemorated on 17th January 2019 at a celebratory function at the Elf Drilling Service Hub in Kuruman, Northern Cape.

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Epiroc is a leading productivity partner for the mining, infrastructure and natural resources industries. With cutting-edge technology, Epiroc develops and produces innovative drill rigs, rock excavation and construction equipment, and provides world-class service and consumables. The company was founded in Stockholm, Sweden, and has passionate people supporting and collaborating with customers in more than 150 countries. Learn more at www.epiroc.com.

Press release from Epiroc South Africa (Pty) Ltd

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