



a touch of Elon Musk about him. He's a man of slight build but indomitable character who wears his nickname like a badge of pride: "Stokkies" means "sticks" in Afrikaans, but Van Zyl is made of iron.

Stokkies van Zyl and his team have been at work on the project since September 2015 and have been given a quota of 32 dish antenna back-up structures to manufacture for the MeerKAT project. By phase two, they'll need to have produced 196, and by phase 3, with SKA well

underway, 2500. Stokkies is pragmatic. "By that stage, I'll need another 1,000 employees." Is it achievable? "Of course!" he says with a knowing smile. It seems the wheels of progress are already turning.

Most entrepreneurs would be daunted by this expansion, but to Van Zyl, no obstacle is too big. As one of his employees says: "Stokkies will challenge you and push you. You'll think it's impossible, but once you get there, you'll look back and realize it was possible all along." His desire for a challenge

is one of the reasons he has transformed his business into the biggest employer in the Matzikama region and a provider of jobs for hundreds of families.

51 members of Van Zyl's 162 staff work on the project full time. Machines cut and robots whir, while welders weld by hand. Everywhere you look, sparks are flying. It is a veritable beehive of activity as structures and nodes are produced, one after the other. Every team member is entrusted with the duty to ensure that the next person down

the line meets his deadline. Time is precious, and no one idles.

Namaqua Engineering currently has the capacity to produce two completed MeerKAT back-up structures per month. It will eventually be necessary to double this output. However, with the kind of painstaking attention to detail and high quality standards required for the project, it'll take time, but Van Zyl is more than convinced that it is possible. Every part of the structure is carefully analysed and verified, and once assembled, the entire structure is put through a rigorous verification procedure to ensure that it conforms to the original design.

Five years ago, MeerKAT wouldn't have been possible for Namaqua Engineering, since its skilled artisans still worked mostly by hand. But today, because of his vision and unbreakable will, Van Zyl has invested millions into the latest 2D and 3D laser cutter technology, robotic welding systems, physical verification instrumentation, software and accurate line boring equipment.

The SKA project is committed to finding life in space, and with Namaqua Engineering at the reins, that reality is closer than we think. /

