



Reconnaissance

Professional Surveyors: Where—and Who—Art Thou?

As I have traveled the country this year, several interrelated themes keep coming up. One is something I have not heard in a while: “Where can I find good people?” Back in ancient times (pre-2007), I heard that question constantly, then for about 7 years, not at all. But now it’s back.

The other day, the Indiana Society of Professional Land Surveyors (ISPLS) website—which lets anyone, member or not, post job openings on its web site—showed 15 postings for surveying positions covering everything from CAD operators to licensed professional surveyors in large firms and small firms, and from state government to local government. Some, if not most, of those postings have been up there for a while.

We know that some who left the profession—either as technicians or as professionals—during the recession have moved on to other things, and likely will not be back. Or maybe they will—at least some of them—if wages improve (which may or may not be in the cards, short to mid-term), and long term employment opportunities reappear. A dearth of qualified candidates *should* result in higher wages and/or improved benefits simply in order to get people in the door to interview, but whether those types of improving conditions exist is not something I am certain of at this point. Perhaps not, if positions continue to go begging.

Depending on exactly what part of the country they were in and what markets their companies served, those who entered the profession in the early 90’s could have gone over 16 years without suffering the pain of a significant recession and a big drop in the stock market (the 2001 recession saw a drop in GDP of only 0.3% and unemployment

peaked at 6.3%). Anyone with half a brain can run a successful business during those times. There was more work than all of us could do! You just invest in the market and it rises like a hot air balloon forever, right? Not so much.

In fact, post-World War II, the average length of time between the end of the last recession and the beginning of the next has been about 4 years and 10 months. During

ever knew a surveyor who decided to simply hang up his or her license upon retirement. Surveyors tend to keep their license until they go to the great pin-cushion corner in the sky. Given that they may not be practicing and don’t want to have to keep up with their continuing education requirements, they may have renewed inactive, but they still carry a license and skew the numbers.

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that period, the longest time between recessions was 10 years and the shortest, 1 year. As I write this, it has been 6 years and 3 months since the end of the Great Recession (which actually resulted in a lower peak unemployment rate than the recession of the early 1980’s). Of course, as has been said, you can drown in a lake the average depth of which is one foot, so averages don’t really tell us much. In any event, we are most assuredly closer to the next recession than we are from the last.

Earlier I mentioned the *short to mid-term* prospects for improved conditions for employment in surveying, but what about long-term? I am not one who tends get excited about the supposed average age of the professional surveyor. I’m not sure that I

I have no numbers to confirm this, but I also suspect the average professional surveyor did not first receive his or her license until their mid-thirties. All of these facts/assumption lead me to believe that the age of the average surveyor is going to be fairly high and that it has probably always been fairly high. Is it inching higher? No doubt; but few readers of this column probably know that the real estate profession is very concerned because according to the National Association of Realtors the average age of a Realtor in the United States is—bingo!—57 years old. And only 6% of them are under 34. If those numbers sound familiar, they should.

We have mostly have a demographics problem, but we cannot downplay the technology and perception problems.

Notwithstanding suppositions drawn from pure numbers and conjecture, there are some clear trends that do not involve speculation. When I started in surveying, the typical field crew was comprised of 3, maybe 4 persons. Extensive training was routine and necessary, and the technologies employed required someone—typically and hopefully registrants or someone directly trained by them—keeping very close tabs on field notes, processes and procedures. It took years to move up the ladder to party chief from initial hiring as a rod-person.

What about today? Today no one sits in front of a computer and punches in angles and distances for hours on end; in fact, there are very few field notes. Sure, there has to be checking of the electronic data, but software and hardware make it much easier than in

MDs, PEs, RNs, JDs and AIAs. What about surveyors? Well, we may be an RLS, LS, LLS, RPLS, PS, PLS and probably one or two others I haven't thought of. No wonder people are confused over what we do—we can't even agree on what to call ourselves.

What about a "national license" (or more likely, universal reciprocity) for everything except boundaries? When some surveyor from just over the line in Illinois calls to ask me if they can step over the state line and perform a topographic survey in Indiana, it is utterly ridiculous to essentially say "Sorry, without an Indiana license, you are not qualified." The story is the same in every state. Seriously? And that doesn't even take into account the fact that technology is very quickly overtaking everything in surveying except the legal aspects.

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the past. The concern on boundary surveys today is—or should be—related to finding the evidence, which is directly tied to gaining the experience. But who is getting the years-long experience required to understand why and when the evidence is important, what to look for, and how to find it? Now *that* is something I get worried about. And that does not even address the fact that the average field crew is 25% smaller than it was 40 to 50 years ago. It seems to me that fewer people also equals less need for direct supervision of those people, hence perhaps a lessened need—or at least a lessened *perceived* need—for professionals.

Technology is going to do what it will. It has already resulted directly in a decrease of 75% in field technician employment over 40-50 years. Surveyors can do nothing about that if they want to stay competitive. But where will the seasoned, experienced field technicians come from? Fortunately, there are still some surveying programs that turn out graduates who can rapidly become excellent technicians, but beyond that no one is being trained on the job anymore. Technology and the competitive market have taken care of that.

What we *can* do something about is the perception problem. Can we *at least* agree on a name for ourselves? Let's see—we have

Construction stakeout is a math problem that hardware and software have solved. Creating a topographic map is a mundane exercise that anyone with modest equipment and training can undertake. Are there esoteric things that only surveyors know about? Probably, but trust me, technology will overcome even those obstacles in short order.

The surveying profession needs to come to grips with the fact that technology is already well into the process of democratizing everything we do except as related to the legal aspects. The law always falls behind society and technology, but it will change to accommodate that fact. In the meantime, the challenges remain. Who are we? What do we do and why? Where do we come from? Where are we going? And, most importantly, what are we going to do about it? We have the ability to shape the future of our beloved profession, but denial, wishful thinking and digging in our heels will not constitute a successful strategy. ■

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