



The Forgotten Profession

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We, the surveying community and individual surveyors, are in an elite group. While other disciplines are billing themselves as professional the surveying community teeters ever closer to losing our professional status and forever becoming a trade in the eyes of the public. This is due in large part to our unwillingness or inability to deal with what is involved in maintaining surveying as a profession.

You do not need to look far to see a profession that has placed itself upon a pedestal while convincing the public that without their assistance, you are doomed to a tough process. That profession is the multi-billion dollar real estate industry. While the current economic downturn has put a dent in their incomes, commissions have increased lock-step with the ever-increasing value of real property.

At the same time, surveying fees have gone backwards in real dollars. There are still surveyors who will do a lot survey on a \$1 million property for \$350 to \$500 while the real estate agent grosses somewhere in the \$60,000 range for selling the same property. To add insult to injury, if the property sells again next month for \$1.2 million, the commission could potentially be another \$72,000, and the agent drives his or her luxury car to the bank to deposit the check and never looks back or feels guilty about making that fee. More power to them; that is the way it should work.

At the same time, we (surveying professionals) will get a call from that same agent asking us for another copy of the \$350 survey and beating us down on the fee because we were "just there last month and nothing has changed." The real kicker is this: Some of us will just give it to them. Why do we do this? By virtue of providing a copy of the survey, the surveyor accepts liability to a third party for which he gets paid little or nothing. The real estate agent has nearly zero liability to either the seller or the buyer once the closing takes place, while the surveyor's liability continues for years.

Again, I have to ask why?

In order to answer that question, we need to look at how we got to where we are. Throughout the history of surveying, the profession has been basically a technical one. However, times have changed faster than we have. By virtue of our silence, we have allowed GIS and its associated GPS work to slip from our grasp. Machine control has replaced construction staking in areas while we were asleep at the switch. Three-dimensional scanning is the newest tool available to the surveying community, but it too is

about to slip away if we don't embrace the technology that is changing the way surveying is done right before our eyes.

The technologies mentioned above are high tech, high touch, and expensive. Those charged with grabbing onto them are in most cases highly educated business people first and technical people second. Unfortunately, a majority of registered surveyors today don't even want to talk about new technologies, let alone embrace them. We seem to be saying to the world that the *status quo* is the way to go. If we are going to expand the profession, we need to rethink the way we do business and embrace new ideas, technologies, and processes. Quite honestly, we need to think more along the lines of the real estate profession as described earlier.

Our professional societies, at all levels, are pushing for more and more surveyors to replace those that spin out of the profession through retirement, death, or just because they simply cannot make a decent living. At various venues around the country, I have heard multiple times that we need to "get more people registered" to keep the profession alive. Because the number of active surveyors is dwindling in virtually every state, various solutions have been proposed to increase the numbers. Some boards have elected to relax requirements such as the four-year degree requirement. Others have proposed other changes to "increase the numbers."

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The bottom line is this: We do not need more technical surveyors with few business skills coming into the profession; we need more professional surveyors with more business savvy and professional attitude who are able to think outside the box. If you are able to pass the exam in its current configuration, you likely are going to be a good technical surveyor. Realistically though, the exam does not test business skills in any shape or form. Moreover, the current licensing structure in some states discourages or outright disallows business-building classes to be used for meeting the annual Continuing Professional Development requirements.

Please do not get me wrong on this: The technical portion of the surveying profession requires you to be a good surveyor and fulfill your duty to protect the public. However, if you are unable to relate to your clients and other professionals in a business-like manner, you are destined to be perceived as less than a professional in the eyes of the public.

One option to think about is adding more business questions to the Principals and Practices exam. This could be accomplished by integrating them into the current exam structure or requiring an additional exam in business practices for someone to receive a COA to operate a surveying business. The current exam configuration tests only for minimum competence in basic boundary law, theory, and the technical aspects of surveying. This exam could be made more difficult and comprehensive.

Also, instead of discouraging or outright disallowing business and other non-technical classes from counting toward our annual CPD requirements, encourage part of the hours to be met with accounting, basic business, listening skills, or conflict management classes. A class that builds knowledge in job costing would provide the practising surveyor with tools to understand why he may not be making any money. Management classes could provide training in dealing with the everyday interaction with employees and clients. The list is virtually endless, and we have barely scratched the surface on the business side of the equation. Business savvy is one area where we are failing both in and outside of the profession.

Whether you realize it or not, nothing in our developed environment has been, can be, or will be designed or constructed without the assistance of a surveyor.

Can we encourage people to come into the profession? Absolutely, but let's not do it just because the numbers are shrinking and we need more surveyors. Do it because our profession is the noble one of Thomas Jefferson and Rufus Putnam. Whether you realize it or not, nothing in our developed environment has been, can be, or will be designed or constructed without the assistance of a surveyor. We are usually the first in, last out, and needed throughout. Let's make sure that the surveyor is a "professional surveyor" by rethinking the manner in which we do business. It is a long-term proposition to make this happen.

If we don't do something quickly, we are destined to becoming a non-profession in the not-too-distant future as technological advances and processes continue to pass us by. ✪

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