Training the Generations for Business Success

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Key words: Learning; Innovation; Community; Service.

SUMMARY

This paper is a discussion of some of the paradigms around the business success of the surveying profession. These paradigms may have blinded us from the need to guide our model for sustainability and relevance in the community. There have been several adjustments to the training regimes and workplace experiences for young surveyors, brought about by the influences of these business paradigms on our profession. Financial success has reinforced a move towards production line operations, and innovation is seen as adopting new technology and not an awakening to new services. In turn our profession is less attractive to the new entrants to the labour market and employee retention. By not embracing a workplace environment of continuous learning we may have lost touch with the needs of our staff and the community who hire us.

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1. INTRODUCTION

We are an ancient profession steeped in the history of science, navigation, discovery and charting. The observation, recording and presentation of geography and human activity identifies the skills and personal attributes of the surveying profession. Society's needs for an understanding of its activities are continuously evolving as the natural and built environment change. As our service is to support this changing need of understanding, we are a continuously learning profession.

There are three stages or paradigms that the profession may consider. They are not mutually exclusive and if operating simultaneously they present serious distractions to the strategic positioning, for the long term, of people resources necessary to run any surveying operations.

2. 'TECHNOLOGY FIRST' PARADIGM

The paradigm of 'Technology First' evolved when surveyors embraced the technological revolution of electronics and computers. Early beginners saw the invention and subsequent innovation of electronic distance measurement. Total stations with electronic angular measurement soon followed along with data recorders, desktop computers and auto plotting including inkjet and laser printing. Digital photography and scanners are now relatively common place and a capacity for digital storage seems limitless. What is next? This stage will go on for some time at an accelerating rate.

This paradigm represents the time since the 1960's and 70's when the surveying profession started thriving on invention and science to do things faster, more accurately and more often. Business is brisk in the expanding infrastructure world. Over time technology has reduced the need for some employees, while surveying graduates with hi-tech backgrounds have maintained status as valued staff. In this world where the science boffin is king, there is an educational focus on the science of the tools we need for the job.

In past years most surveying organizations had long established trainee type processes where junior staff worked alongside experienced surveyors to 'learn the ropes'. This arrangement was a good partnership. The junior could learn the techniques, purpose of the work and the responsibility to the client and community. The junior knew the latest technology trends and the senior could harness innovation to drive better business outcomes. This workplace relationship is now strained by the rate of change in technology and the associated time that is necessary to stay in touch.

Knowledge of technology is seen as the recipe for future business success as GPS, GIS, scanning and other specialist businesses evolve. This technology paradigm produces experts

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in the use of surveying tools but is a distraction from the suit of functions of our profession and long lasting business success.

The FIG definition of the "Functions of the Surveyor" is:

– to determine, measure and represent land, three-dimensional objects, point-fields and trajectories
– to assemble and interpret land and geographically related information
– to use that information for the planning and efficient administration of the land, the sea and any structures thereon
– to conduct research into the above practices and to develop them.(FIG, 2004)

If this is the case, then the 'technology first' approach has a bias to business in determination, measurement and the assembly of information. As professionals we set ourselves apart from machine operations by interpretation, planning, administration, research and innovation by continuous learning.

I do not disagree with Thomas Mackie, PS, associate with Woolpert Inc in Dayton, Ohio, when he said 'modern technology is critical for the long-term survival of your business' (Grant R., 2008) at a conference session in Las Vagas, November 2007, titled 'Staying on the Crest of the Technology Wave'. I cannot take his words literally when he says 'it's important for surveyors to stay up to date with technology because it lengthens the list of clients and project types'. This is a simplification of what it takes to grow a business. Technology is not the only factor to consider in establishing new business and delivering professional judgement in the complex relationships that nurture business success.

This paradigm distracts us from planning, advisory, risk management, project management and administration roles that this profession should be highly suited to, in serving our clients and community. These roles give us relevance in the development of the social and physical environment in which we live. Experience in such roles can be the springboard to real technical innovation; that is business solutions effectively adapted to a range of services delivered to a broad client base.

I note the increasing recognition in the universities of reinforcing a range of personal skills and attributes in support of making graduates' workplaces attractive. I do however recognize that it is not mainstream practice for surveying businesses to foster leadership and people orientated competencies as a way of building surveying (technology) business.

3. 'THE CONTRACT' PARADIGM

By the late 1980's 'The Contract' business paradigm had started. It now flourishes in a world of globalization and rides the wave of economic rationalism, washing over nearly every organizational bureaucracy. Governments downsize their public service and start operating by lowest price tendering. In this environment everybody is focused on cost-cutting exercises and getting the contract delivered with the least resource. The legal profession often

embraces the extraction of every consideration from the contract with neither party reaching real satisfaction. The realization is that management complexity is raised infinitely when every issue and risk is to be predetermined and included in a contract.

This paradigm drives our businesses to buy resources only as needed. Adherence to the 'contract' paradigm encourages the adoption of a culture of minimum compliance within business law and a shallow adherence to our profession's code of ethics. This financial regime excludes exercising judgement for both the community and the client.

When the flow of experienced people from government to the private operators still existed there developed a complacency regarding training and resource numbers. Some years on we recognize that inevitable retirements have depleted the profession's resources. Concurrently our educational institutions have not been able to react to the situation - they also could be drowning in economic rationalism.

In this climate the workforce has developed scepticism of their employer's motives. Staff change jobs, lured by financial offers, and remain dissatisfied with organisational working environments.

There is not a sufficient health check on the people component of our businesses. Training is reduced to a parade of 'doing experiences' with little or no coaching and mentoring. Supervisors have fallen out of practice or don't have the time under the economic pressure cloud of the 'contracts' paradigm. This pays little heed to the learning cycle that people require to develop their profession capabilities (Senge P.M., Roberts C., Ross R.B., Smith B.J., Kleiner A., 1994).

In order for development and learning to occur, time is required for coaching and mentoring. This time gives rise to reflection and analysis of current issues and guidance to the future visions that fuel the motivation needed to tackle the goals of a professional career.

If the members of our profession cannot enunciate a clear unified vision for the current and future roles we have in society then how can someone, who is from outside and looking in, recognize them? Behavioural psychologist, Kurt Einstein said 'to the degree that people know what you expect, to the same degree they can succeed' (Hacker C.A., 2008).

4. 'NOW' PARADIGM

While we are immersed in technology and financial returns, we do not necessarily take a reality check on the social impact of these forces. There are two parts to this 'now' paradigm – the environmental challenge, and the generational change of the workforce.

Today's challenge for all our clients and consequently ourselves, is to embrace the new world of sustainability. Environmental sustainability has become the 'now' issue that corporate leaders, politicians and bureaucrats would only ignore at their own peril (Tarrant D., 2008).

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Our profession must be at the forefront of developing leading solutions as our social contribution into the new age.

Not surprisingly, a new focus on sustainability is generating new career direction within some surveying organizations as they build capabilities to measure and innovate ways of improving the performance of some of society's activities. Early beneficiaries include urban land use, farming and transport.

Let us not overlook the increase in environmental legislation. Our profession is well positioned to provide assistance to companies and individuals as they comply with the emerging 'green tape'. We are very familiar with the requirements of town planning approval 'red tape'. 'Green tape' is the time, information, approval documents and governance requirements to comply with the complexity of environmental legislation (New South Wales Business Chamber, 2007). There is no doubt that the trend is there and that we could innovate to find practical solutions. This would assist our clients to ensure that their contribution to the environmental issues is seen as building corporate worth.

Employment researchers tell us that in the majority our workforce is made up of three distinct generations - the Baby Boomers, the X Generation and the Y Generation (McCrindle M., 2007). Each one is moulded by the dominant influences of their upbringing. The reasons for employment, the preferences for training and the fundamentals of motivation vary according to the generation. An understanding of these generational differences can be found in relatively recent literature. There are serious blockages to effective business if the fundamentals and differences for our workforce are not understood. Failure in the 'now paradigm' is to assume that the rules and methods of engagement in employment and staff relations can be stereotyped. The usually action justification phrase of 'if it was good enough for me when I did …' will not work.

The most recent groups out of university are the now generation, commonly called the Y Generation. The Y Generation is success driven with a high level of social consciousness. They anticipate that life will be a mosaic of different roles and experiences. This is a response to the changing times and the expectation of accelerating change.

Never before has the adage 'train in order to retain' been more appropriate than at this time. We are facing this digital generation that grew up with the web, text messaging, online courses, digital libraries and virtual learning exercises. They are comfortable in playing around with technology in order to get a result, but they need direction and purpose to channel their talents towards business application and productivity (Dean B., 2004).

The problem for our profession is not how to attract good people but how to retain them. We must get our house in order in preparation for the receiving of a new member to our business families. A staff member must value the workplace experience and feel comfortable they can learn at a rate in proportion to the changing world. I believe that there is real organizational advantage in providing a coached path into a life of workplace experiential learning.

This draws us to be aware of the factors that most influence the effectiveness of training. It is desirable that by learning we can keep our professional services up with, or exceeding, change. The results from research by Susan Cromwell and Judith Kolb on the transfer of training are of assistance here (Cromwell S.E., Kolb J.A., 2004). Firstly a supportive organizational climate is required; management is judged on its encouragement of the use of knowledge, skills and abilities introduced in training within the workplace.

Secondly, learning is dependant on the immediate supervisor's reinforcement and support of the use of training on the job. This management and coaching role is identified as the most important influence on a learning outcome. The Y generation's social need promotes the importance of this relationship.

Thirdly, learning effectiveness requires some degree of support from a peer work group. This group must support a team understanding of training and the performance opportunities for new and sometimes more difficult tasks.

Lastly, if an outside peer network is available for reference and benchmarking then it allows an understanding of context and the value of learning.

Our professional institutions, or peer network organizations, provide a venue for social interaction as well as training and knowledge sharing. I encourage all professional institutions to actively take up a communication model where they are the profession's voice to government, fellow professions and the community. In addition, these partners should be fostered to use the institutions for dialogue and engagement with the surveying profession.

In recognition of the role of mentoring and coaching in achieving a learning environment (Conner M.L., Clawson J.G. (eds), 2004), we must adjust to the needs of different generations. We should also recognize the value of and enable reverse mentoring where knowledge may flow in both directions.

5. CONCLUSION

Human capital represents a neglected area of opportunity. We can no longer assume that learning is something that is just supposed to happen. It requires an advocated vision of what our professional businesses will be. Our business strategic plan should identify the resources, time and the supervisory competencies that the business will invest in to strengthen organizational capability. Let us embrace an environment of continuous learning as an essential factor in our various organizations' ability to innovate and grow profitably. By developing skills in reflection and enquiry we can learn from life's experiences to build ongoing additions to our professional tool boxes.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Frank Culliver is the Director of Technical Leadership for the Technical and Information Division of VicRoads, the state road authority in Victoria, Australia. For 10 years prior to this October 2007 appointment he headed the VicRoads Survey and Land Information Department. Frank has many years experience in land development and infrastructure surveying and the management of various commercial enterprises.

Frank is a member of the Institution of Surveyors Australia (ISA) and the Australian Institute of Management. He was president of the Victoria Division of ISA in 2005 and is a Federal Councillor on the ISA committee.

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