

Crisis, What Crisis?

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In my view, the lack of financial resources, or *money*, is the single most damaging issue facing the private sector surveying profession in Ontario today.

Many of our business owners simply do not have the financial resources:

- to purchase the latest software and hardware to remain competitive with other professionals who provide similar services.
- to hire technicians and university graduates to operate the equipment and to develop the products and services that the latest hardware and software provides.
- to effectively manage both the survey and business portions of their practices.
- to venture into new and developing earth-based data management, such as the Ontario Digital Cadastre.
- to demonstrate, communicate and educate the public about the value of our professional services.

Why is the lack of money a problem in our association? I truly believe that it is mainly because most of us do not charge enough for our work. *As professional surveyors, we must charge a professional rate for a professional service!* We provide professional opinions on legal boundaries, which is an exclusive privilege but we almost give those opinions away!

This issue of money is a topic that seems to be only discussed in small groups of like-minded people often focused on their competitors and their low bidding practices. But these conversations don't lead anywhere, and instead, we wrongfully hope that our competitor(s) will retire so that we can start charging the fees that we should! It's time to stop the madness and inactivity and face up to this very real issue and do something. How did we get to this point? Is it because of:

- the lack of understanding of good business practices?
- the lack of value the public places on our professional services?
- the lack of value that some of our members place on our professional services?
- the decline of some of our surveying services, e.g., Surveyor's Real Property Report?
- the high number of surveyors and firms in certain regions, e.g., the GTA?
- the different levels of services provided by our various members?
- open bidding?
- perceived fear of price fixing as a result of the Federal Combines investigation of our association and subsequent report many years ago?

Regardless of the reason(s), as I see it, we are still refusing to acknowledge and discuss the problems and the negative impact that it is having on our profession. We need to bring the issues out into the open and tackle and resolve them now!

I suspect that many of our members do not have the resources/money to purchase the latest software and hardware that is necessary to remain competitive with other professionals. I have seen that more and more of our clients are retaining engineering and architectural firms to provide data because software companies (MicroSurvey, AutoCAD, MicroStation) now operate in Microsoft Cloud and Google environments. However, we have failed to charge an additional percentage of our fees to keep up with such upgrades.

Similarly, many of us may not have the resources/money to pursue new and developing earth-based data management projects, such as the Ontario Digital Cadastre. While the idea of a digital cadastre sounds good, money can represent a huge roadblock. With our education and experience, we should be the leaders in offering new services related to these applications. When will we recognize this fact?

Also, many of our members do not have the resources/money to hire and retain highly qualified people to operate and, more importantly, develop the products and services that the latest hardware and software enable. We now know the negative impacts of closing the University of Toronto Survey Science Program and of having only one college level survey technician program left in Ontario. We also know that the majority of new graduates are traveling westward for employment. Is this declining trend due to economic times or something else? We have failed to see, as surveyors, that the health of our profession does not start with our college and university graduates. It starts and ends with us, the professionals.

As everyone is aware, Professional Surveyors Canada just recently completed a salary survey. The numbers were disheartening but realistic. What the survey doesn't show is the fact that after we pay ourselves as business owners, there is not much left to benefit our employees. Many of us have seen staff move to another employer for 50 cents more per hour. If salaries were solid and less fragile, we could more successfully train, remunerate and keep our employees. I believe that one of the key indicators of success in a private sector business is the number of employees who have left the public sector to join the business. But how often does that happen in surveying? The overly competitive bidding process among the surveyors themselves is undermining our ability to maintain appropriate and stable wage levels.

I also suspect that we lack resources/money to effectively manage both the survey and business portions of a practice. The majority of us were professionally trained to be land surveyors. Unless we grew up in an entrepreneurial environment, most of us have little experience in running, let alone growing, a business. (It always amazes me how I made it this far.) But in truth, this lack of entrepreneurial experience is one of the biggest reasons we suffer a resource deficiency. When was the last time any of us factored the cost of inflation, future investment needs, salary increases, advertising, retirement, and the needed profit margin into a quotation? How many of us understand things like discounted cash flow or the time value of money? We must start submitting bids on projects based on the true costs of the professional service that we provide.

Many of our members also do not have the resources/money to demonstrate, promote, market and communicate to the public the value of our professional service. For example, professional image is important, and this extends to business location and appearance. Professional-looking office space should be a recognized priority for the members of our association. Have you ever received legal advice from a lawyer working out of a basement? A perception of “unprofessionalism” can become reality in the public’s eye.

Furthermore, I have found that we have difficulty communicating not only among ourselves but also with the public. When was the last time you promoted your business by supporting a local sports team or news program, or made a donation to a soup kitchen, coached a kids’ team, posted a company sign on a project, labeled your company vehicle, or submitted a survey article for the local paper or on a web page? We need to do more to raise our profile and let the public know that we exist.

I believe that the newly formed Professional Surveyors Canada organization is our best hope to advocate on behalf of our profession. A strong national voice will provide a means to inform and educate the public about the value of the surveying profession. However, this organization alone will not resolve our resources issue. Only our collective members can address this matter, and it needs to be now!

If we don’t start charging appropriate fees for services rendered, the large firms will get larger and the small and mid-size firms will start to disappear; firms will fall into the haves and have-nots; fewer people will be coming into the profession; fewer will be available or want to buy their businesses; and fewer professionals will be involved in the association. With membership numbers so low, we will no longer be able to serve and protect the public interest, and our profession will disappear.

Only when the majority of our members acknowledge that there is a resource/money issue will we be able to start corrective actions. We must understand the consequences of ignoring the issue. If we don’t, could legislation be passed

to allow other professions to do more of our work, or could our range of services be entirely absorbed by another profession?


I don’t think that we have more than five years to change our ways before damage to our profession is irreversible. By that time, we will be unable to catch up to the other professions that have the resources to provide clients with the data that they require and in the latest medium. We can hold on to the idea that no other profession can establish or re-establish boundaries, however, the current trend indicates that pure cadastral work is becoming a smaller part of the private surveying business, a trend I don’t see changing anytime soon.

Now what do we do to address the issue? I don’t feel individual members or small groups of members can resolve the money/resources issue. Nor do I expect government to come to our rescue. Instead, I believe that our association, under Council’s direction, has to take the lead and direct us through these troubled times. This organization has an obvious vested interest in its members and a mandate to protect the public interest.

Therefore, I think that the association must “raise the bar” and to accomplish this in my view should:

- Raise the minimum standards required by the Survey Review Department: Set standards that instill pride and value in holding a membership and ensure that all association members are providing the public with the best quality of service in the world.
- Require mandatory business development training with comprehensive business courses. This training would allow our members to learn how to evaluate the true cost of operating and developing a business and provide the tools and support to develop a business model tailored to the members’ expertise and geographical requirements.
- Require mandatory committee involvement. Introduce all members to the inner workings of our association. Instill a sense of pride and value in our vocation and association.
- Develop new surveying services and products to meet the changing needs of the public and industry.

Our association can do these things and more, but only with the support of the majority of the association’s members. I urge you to write to Council, share your thoughts, make other suggestions, or write an article in the quarterly; do whatever it takes. Show you care about this profession!

The time to change our current path is now. Let’s tackle our issues and make this a dynamic, respected, well-recognized and rewarding profession. 

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