

The Challenge of Proficiency

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As part of the FHWA International Scan Tour to Australia and Canada in 2008, I was honored to represent the U.S. State Departments of Transportation and serve as the AASHTO Co-Chair.

The team members reflected an assembly of diverse backgrounds and experience in public sector transportation project development, right of way acquisition and utility accommodation. This diversity would provide an invaluable perspective, especially given the wide range of core disciplines we encompass and the minimum experience and skill required for proficiency in right of way and utility work.

One of our primary objectives was to examine other nation's strategic approaches to succession planning with particular focus on the recruitment, training and professional development investment required to meet the needs of the emerging right of way and utility work force. From the nine initiatives selected for implementation, the team identified the **“development of a standard framework to establish proficiency of right of way and utility professionals in core disciplines”** as a high priority.

The Multidisciplinary Challenge

Most right of way professionals I have met over the years tell a story very similar to my own experience of random introduction to the profession. It wasn't by design, but by stumbling through one of two basic ports of entry. The more typical avenue seems to be by way of a previous career or prior



experience and formal education in one of the component professions that contribute to the collection of right of way “subject matter expertise.” These include real estate and title attorneys, civil engineers and surveyors, appraisers and more recently, project management and real property asset management professionals.

A second avenue of entry into the right of way profession is characterized by a similarity of personality type and past success working in direct customer service delivery. Remarkable for their entrepreneurial enthusiasm, these renaissance professionals are sociable and outgoing in nature, possessing a boundless appetite for variety in their daily challenge. The stories told by this stereotypical right of way veteran are characterized by the accumulation of diverse career experiences gathered over time and according to the ambiguous plans of a nomadic adventurer. This

avenue is one that showcases the strengths of typically successful right of way professionals and is also a source of the growing proficiency concern. The soft, interpersonal skills that were historically accumulated over an expanse of time and past experiences must now be acquired in a more focused and deliberate fashion.

Regardless of the path, the current challenge that confronts the profession is to meet the growing demand for a qualified workforce. This workforce would need to be available in adequate supply. To be immediately effective in the delivery of first line right of way and utility services, right of way professionals would also need to be proficient across a range of legal, technical and interpersonal skill sets. No matter what brings us to the right of way profession, the common characteristics include the passionate pursuit of just treatment, an equitable

remedy, determination of fair compensation and the proper application of legal process intended for the protection of private property rights. Right of way transactions are intricate, time consuming one-on-one, personal negotiations. The complex nature of right of way practice imposes unique challenges to development and maintenance of comprehensive program of professional quality education.

The Guru Gap and Proficiency

Further complicating the challenges of mastering such a multidisciplinary range of right of way subjects is the short supply of “gurus” to mentor the young “grasshoppers,” and difficulties with recognizing the urgent need to address the accelerating loss of experience and accumulated professional expertise.

Those lessons that were best understood through past experience will be entirely lost, unless they are captured and systematically incorporated to prioritize best practice knowledge transfer. Experience that normally accumulated over time was typically passed along through casual association and on-the-job interaction, rather than purposeful mentoring. The essential role of those of us on the downhill side of the experience curve is to assure that the next generation is properly equipped and prepared. More than to simply assume the mentor position in the hierarchy, it will be critical to embrace the responsibility to capture, organize and share the experience of the past. Fundamental proficiency and a basic level of competency are urgently needed in anticipation of a much less experienced workforce that may not have the benefit of accessible expert counsel.

The objective today is to leverage the benefit of our diverse experience, yet assembled and delivered according to a focused plan and deliberate educational objectives. This is how we must educate the next generation more efficiently and in a fraction of the time.

Our observations of Australian and Canadian transportation agencies confirmed similar challenges to equip and sustain a qualified, more productive workforce within tighter resource limitations. They also confirm the essential nature of a collaborative effort among public and private partners to maximize the benefit of collective investment to meet mutually-agreed upon objectives.

The scan team’s plan to implement strategies to advance professional proficiency will focus on facilitating the cooperative development of a framework for professional qualifications. A framework upon which to structure a curriculum of training and study custom-designed by professional consensus. Consensus with the explicit objective of an accelerated path to proficiency, the basic level of competency across the multidisciplinary range of subjects which are required in practice.

In response to this need, FHWA Office of Real Estate created a series of web-based core right of way training modules to assist their Division Realty Officers in delivering specialized training to their State DOTs, Local Public Agencies and other customers. The DVD contains the Federal Land Transfer Manual, a Right of Way Division Operations Guide, and several other resources. FHWA also created a web-based Realty Capacity Building (RCB) Navigator to help public sector realty professionals identify key

competency areas in their field, improve their agency performance, and facilitate the integration of new staff into the transportation workforce. It can be found on FHWA’s website. In 2009, FHWA sponsored a Learning and Development Seminar, one of a series of workshops being presented in each of the FHWA Disciplines in a multi-pronged effort to support employee training and development and meet the Agency’s goal in addressing corporate capacity.

IRWA’s professional development initiative for the Uniform Relocation Act Certification presents the ideal opportunity for new partnerships to evolve and for those partners to innovate new mechanisms for educational resource development, delivery and professional knowledge transfer. Success will be determined by the success of these partnerships, collaboration and mutual pursuit of a higher professional standard of practice.



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