

Upgrading the right-of-way function in the eyes of upper management



by David E. Punches, SR/WA

This article is adapted from a speech that has been given to several of IRWA's local chapters over the past few years and is still relevant.

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He spent 32 years with the Bell System, retiring as head of American Telephone & Telegraph Company's Right of Way and Liaison Department with offices in New York City. Formerly with Illinois Bell Telephone Company, he spent two years as an engineer on the DEW line and White Alice project in Alaska for the A.T.&T. Company and Western Electric Company.

Extremely active in the International Right of Way Association, Mr. Punches has served in many capacities on both State and International levels. He is past International President and Chairman of the Board of IRWA.

A past member of the American Public Works Association, he served on the Association's Utility Location and Coordination Council as Chairman of the task force for the study to standardize color code marking for underground facilities.

While with American Telephone & Telegraph Company in New York and New Jersey, Mr. Punches authored a textbook on "Right of Way — Acquisition and Management" which is in use today by all of the former Bell companies. He has also written a series of articles for the "Telephone — Engineer and Management" magazine and is a regular contributor of technical articles to various national publications. He also lectures and appears in Seminars throughout the country. Dave is also known as the "father" of the Bell System Right of Way Agents' school formerly held at the Bell System Center for Technical Education in Lisle, Illinois.

"Upgrading" seems to imply that the right-of-way function is looked down upon by top management as some sort of second-rate, unimportant activity. I wonder whether this is really so. From what I've seen and heard, the problem seems to be one of management's lack of understanding of the full potential of our function, rather than a tendency to downgrade it.

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This title also has something of a self-serving air about it. It sounds as though we're saying, "Why don't those guys in "mahogany row" realize what a great bunch we are?" While favorable recognition from the brass is certainly enjoyable, it seems to me that what we're looking for is not status, per se, but rather knowledgeable management support of our function. This is support we must have not to make our work easier or more glamorous but, more basically, to enable us to make the greatest possible contribution to the overall success of our organization. So let me start this discussion by suggesting a completely different title: "Increasing the Effectiveness of the Right-of-Way Function by Clarifying its Role in the Eyes of Management." Still quite a mouthful — and easier to talk about than to accomplish.

Why should we be so concerned about top management's view of the right-of-way function? It seems to me that there are three basic and interrelated benefits which grow from management's understanding and support of our function:

- A soundly based assignment from management as to the objectives and scope of the right-of-way function in our particular organization.
- Well-balanced and clearly defined relationships between the right-of-way department and the other

departments with which we work: engineering, construction, operations, legal, etc.

- More lead time.

Do you remember the old commencement exercise story about the two workers on a construction project who were asked what they were doing? One said, "I'm laying bricks" — The other replied, "I'm building a cathedral." Management's knowledge of the potential of the right-of-way function has a direct bearing, it seems to me, on whether we're bricklayers or cathedral builders. Management can view us simply as the men who can handle all the tedious, nit-picking details when the organization has to acquire a right-of-way, arrange a lease, or buy some property. Or, hopefully, they can charge us with the broader responsibility of using our right-of-way experience in helping to achieve the basic objectives of the organization in a more effective and economical way.

Similarly, management's view of our function will have considerable influence on how we work with other departments in the organization. We can be the "tail-end Charlies," the guys who are never called in on a project until there's obviously some right-of-way chores to perform; or we can be viewed and used as people with important experience who should play an active role from the earliest inception of any project which