

PASSING THE BATON

Developing the next generation of right of way professionals



Like many others, the right of way profession is experiencing a loss of professional expertise as the Baby Boomers retire. Adding to the shortage of qualified right of way professionals is the decades-old practice of state highway departments' reducing their staff, doing away with their internal training programs and encouraging early retirement. With state budgets already inadequate for the transportation needs of the states, training new right of way professionals is a low priority for most. In the utility sector, there is also a shortage of qualified professionals due to the demographics of our population.

This was the topic of a panel discussion at the IRWA Annual Conference this year in Portland, Oregon. Led by Catherine Colan Muth as facilitator, the panel included Drew Gilmore representing Ohio, Rob Stapley representing Montana and Carol Bellinger from HDR representing the private sector. Each panel member was asked: ***What is your agency or company doing to create the next generation of talent for our industry?***



Drew Gilmore, Administrator of the ODOT Office of Real Estate.

Many State DOTs are on the precipice of a knowledge and experience cliff. Looming retirements, fiscal constraints, tight labor markets, training gaps and a new workforce with different goals represent a potential risk to future project delivery timelines and efficiency. In Ohio, the DOT is fortunate to have an extremely competent and experienced staff. However, within the next five years the DOT is facing the potential of over 50 percent turnover. Drew Gilmore is the Administrator of the Office of Real Estate for the Ohio Department of Transportation and he further highlighted the issue saying, "With turnover comes an influx of new staff that need training but many of the retiring staff are our current trainers."

Along with more traditional knowledge management transfer concepts such as training manuals, shadowing and cross-training, Ohio has leaned into technology and tapped into the wealth of experience within the staff Statewide. The DOT is developing online versions of their popular in-person courses to improve the accessibility to the material. Additionally, they have taken a cue from the "YouTube generation." Drew Gilmore explained, "Today if you want to know how to change the cabin air filter in your 2006 Honda Accord, you would just search for that video on YouTube. And we have applied that idea to topics in right of way." The DOT is developing a series of real estate staff-created short videos on specific concepts delivered by the subject matter experts. Some of the videos include discussion on subsurface utility locating, relocation reestablishment expenses, right of way authorization, invoicing, railroad acquisition basics and how to secure a structure for demolition.

Inherently, turnover issues are a future problem and one that can be difficult to create interest in circumventing, but Ohio has a unique perspective. Drew Gilmore shared, "We talk about our knowledge management transfer efforts as opportunities for our people to leave their legacy at the DOT. Our staff have committed their careers and their professional lives to providing the best public service they can. They are proud of the work they do and how it has benefited the public. We want to respect that desire within our people to continue to have Ohio DOT continue to be successful and productive even after they retire."



Rob Stapley, Right of Way Bureau Chief, Montana Department of Transportation.

Like a lot of State DOTs, Montana is preparing for a wave of retirements, with 37 percent of its DOT employees being retirement eligible today. According to

Rob Stapley, Right of Way Bureau Chief with the Montana Department of Transportation, "Retirement is not our only concern. Our employees are not staying in the same position or with the department for their whole career like they did 20-30 years ago." This means the need to be proactive in planning for the future must be the focus, instead of reacting to these pending vacancies.

One of the ways the Montana DOT (MDT) is planning for the future is through succession planning. Stapley explained, "This is not just a buzz word that implies we are handpicking replacements for key positions. Succession planning is all about sharing knowledge, cultivating talent and embracing change." The Engineering Division at MDT has defined succession planning as a future-focused process that identifies and documents knowledge, shares that knowledge through the development of individuals, and positions MDT and its employees to be prepared for inevitable change.

Knowledge sharing looks like many different things, depending on where you are in the organization. Siloed or stand-alone positions require more immediate attention and documentation than areas that have multiple employees performing the same set of tasks. The employees in these siloed positions need to see what is in it for them, whether that is more help, a better way to complete their tasks or exposure to other areas and staff. Information that is gathered in the different areas of MDT is used to cultivate staff, creating an environment where employees can learn and grow. Through the knowledge sharing process, position-specific processes and procedures are documented and made available to all staff. Employees who are interested in other positions can review this information to help them decide if a specific position might be a good fit for them.

According to Stapley, "There isn't one succession planning tool that works for all positions and situations. We have looked at 19 different tools and are focusing on four specific tools: expert interviews, position-specific worksheets, short-term double fill and job rotations." These tools were chosen because of the immediate impact and value that they offer the department. The other tools will be used when they are deemed the best choice for gathering or sharing information. As knowledge and information is gathered from one employee and shared with others, MDT hopes to create a more transparent work environment where employees are prepared for future opportunities within MDT.



**Carol Bellinger, SR/WA,
Associate Vice President,
HDR Engineering, Inc. and
National Transportation
Real Estate Services
Director, HDR, Inc.**

As with many of their clients, HDR is feeling the impacts of a retiring generation. HDR developed an entry level recruiting and training program to help alleviate existing and future staffing challenges. According to Associate Vice President, Carol Bellinger, SR/WA, “We recruit motivated, innovative people who see challenges as opportunities and take satisfaction from solving problems. We recruit and train individuals from local high schools, colleges and pools of licensed realtors. This provides HDR a good cross section of the communities we work and live in while promoting HDR’s commitment to the community.”

Providing professional and technical training for right of way personnel strengthens our industry, improves public service and allows existing staff to clearly see paths to desired career levels.

HDR has numerous programs used to recruit and retain employees, including a referral awards program, a flexible onboarding program that helps new hires integrate swiftly and confidently, a company-wide awards program, a service award program and college reimbursement. Additionally, HDR has an officer program to provide opportunities for employees to be promoted to an officer of the company, a professional associates program where individuals are elected as experts in their respective service areas, as well as a fellowship program to help employees pursue their ideas and foster innovation.

According to Bellinger, “The future of HDR relies on the innovative perspectives that young professionals bring in developing solutions for our clients. Our investment in the next generation is important for HDR and contributes to the next generation of professionals for our industry.”



**Catherine Colan Muth, CEO of O.R.
Colan Associates and ORC Utility &
Infrastructure Land Services, LLC.**

ORC has a long tradition of developing and delivering training for the right of way industry, beginning with Mr. Colan’s first training course in the 1970’s entitled The Art of Professional Negotiations. For more than 40 years, ORC has developed courses for the National Highway Institute (NHI), the training arm of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). In 2016, ORC teamed with IRWA to provide development of online training courses for the IRWA Online University. In these many ways, ORC has contributed to the training and development of the next generation of right of way professionals for our industry.

Beginning in 2005, ORC recognized that the retirement of the Baby Boomer generation was going to create a shortfall of trained right of way professionals. As the company continued to grow, they were finding it more difficult to find experienced right of way agents. In response to this, they expanded their internal training program and began to recruit recent college graduates. ORC’s Jr. Agent Training Program is a three-year structured curriculum that includes internal courses as well as courses from IRWA, NHI and the Appraisal Institute. The program allows substitution of state courses when required by states like Ohio.

For the first six months, a Jr. Agent is on corporate overhead while they focus on completing a group of selected training courses and assigned field tasks. The training begins with a one-week overview introductory course of the Uniform Act that ends with a day of instruction on plan reading. Each Jr. Agent is assigned a mentor and is provided a written learning plan. The Jr. Agent generally graduates to an Agent 1 position after six months and continues their training plan over a period of three years.

More than 20 percent of ORC’s employees and managers originated from the Jr. Agent Training program. Recently, ORC has focused on recruitment of second career people who have relevant experience in other areas and can quickly transition into the right of way industry. The search for second career applicants has also focused on those coming out of the military. Last year, ORC began an Internship Program that invites college students to work part time while earning college credits as a way of exploring a career in right of way.

According to the company’s CEO, Catherine Colan Muth, “These programs represent a substantial financial investment, but ORC realizes that this investment is critical to our ability to continue to grow and to meet the needs of our industry.” ☺