

BUSINESS PRACTICES FOR SURVEYORS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The world is changing. We are all very aware of this, and that the rate of change is increasing. These changes impact on surveying businesses as least as much as they impact on other businesses. In many cases, however, the education and training of surveyors (of every discipline) gives a good deal of time to technological developments and their impacts, but rather less time to the changing challenges of management.

A particular strand of the change is that public expectations of professionals are growing in the light of scandals such as those associated with Ivan Boesky and Robert Maxwell. Ethical and other priorities can be particularly tangled for professionals such as surveyors, with their sense of duty being split in a number of different directions – Allred (1999) suggests that professionals are subject to (often conflicting) standards of their own, their company, their profession, and the public.

In light of these increasing challenges, FIG's Commission 1 has been collating practical guidance for surveyors (particularly who run their own firms), to provide reference material covering some of the challenges they are likely to face. This paper describes, within the context of the business changes underway, the work done to date.

2. THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

Before examining the specific management issues being faced by surveyors, we should first stand back and reflect on the world in which we live and operate. What are the main developments underway? The classic management school approach to such a question is to undertake a PEST (or STEP, if you're American) analysis. The themes summarised below draw heavily on such an analysis completed by the author a few years ago (Greenway 1997).

- Politically, trade is becoming increasingly global. This alters dramatically the pool of work and competition with which any survey firm is faced. It also draws into sharper relief the need to be clear what fresh challenges, or different cultures, exist when working across international boundaries (or being faced in your home market by overseas competitors). Managers increasingly need to understand transnational differences in people, cultures and law.
- Another political theme is 'a transformation in the very nature of public services' (David Rhind's words from the 1996-2001 Ordnance Survey of Great Britain's

Strategic Plan). The public sector is now generally there to undertake activity that cannot appropriately be undertaken by the private sector. Such a shift of political emphasis has cross-party support in many parts of the world, and again leads to a changed style of working and competing amongst the private sector firms bidding for what historically had been public sector work, creating further management challenges.

- Economically, control is increasingly becoming centralised into the hands of a few mega-corporations. To complement these very large organisations, other firms tend to maintain a small size and a flexibility of operations, adopting niche positions. The need for all-round management and business skills is therefore brought into stark relief for those surveyors running small companies, where they may often be unsupported by business experts, and where professional consultancy advice may be beyond budgetary reach.
- Socially, our expectations as customers have changed radically. We all now expect a product or service which meets our requirements precisely, rather than making do with something standard. This change has been facilitated by developing technology, particularly in the computer field. We expect to specify exactly what we want – and then for it to be delivered, on time and at a fixed price. The service elements are being specified as closely as the product elements (indeed, it is very often hard to delineate where one starts and the other ends). This increase in expectations is applied particularly to professional service providers, with advisers increasingly expected to be fully accountable (including financially) for their advice and its consequences. This trend in customer expectations and in technological developments is also leading the intertwining of different professions, meaning that a professional is expected to have a base knowledge of a number of other professions.
- Tied in with this social change is the growth of pressure groups, who can add significantly to the complexity of the balances to be struck by professionals – a key differentiation of professionals from others is a professional's ability (indeed, duty) to consider the needs of wider society as well as those of the client, and to be able to deal with this balance successfully. For surveyors, this balance becomes particularly important with the growth of the environmental agenda.
- Many governments are becoming increasingly intolerant of self-regulation by professionals, in the face of continuing scandals around the world, and are looking to detailed regulations to guard against foul play. This again makes it harder, as a professional running a small firm, to maintain the knowledge and procedures required to operate both legally and professionally.
- Perhaps the most profound changes in much of the surveying community are technological. In the 1950s, the operation of a theodolite was the work of a professional, served by several porters and bookers. Compare that with the present day, where the push of a button will provide a position accurate to millimetres, where a theodolite will track a target and give continuous readings, where deformation monitoring equipment will transmit results down a telephone line without the presence of an operator being required at all. Such rapid change requires professionals to keep up with the developments, on an ongoing basis, if they are to be used to best effect for clients and the economy.

We must therefore conclude that the nature of a surveyor's work, both technical and managerial, has changed fundamentally, with the pressures and expectations increasing relentlessly.

3. THE DUAL ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL AND BUSINESS MANAGER

All of the above places additional pressures on those professional surveyors who are often required to balance the dual roles of being a professional expert and a businessman. Neither role can be ignored, and the abilities of an individual in both of them will continually be challenged.

At the heart of it all, I believe, is the lure of the profession to students. There is real professional interest in measuring the size of the earth, determining value, or making a land market work. As it was put to me at a conference some years ago, many of us entered the profession for 'landrovers and sunsets' – my particular experience was on a university field course on the hills around Edinburgh. This means that many of us want to stay outdoors as far into our careers as possible. Looking back to my MSc course in the late 1980s, there was an emphasis on field work, on how to use instrumentation (as well as understanding the fundamental principles on which it operated) and very little on the art of management. I guess that this was the rule rather than the exception. As we have seen above, however, the role of the surveyor has changed dramatically.

The vocation felt by many entrants to the surveying profession means that most of us will, in most cases, have a personal interest in the content of our work, and a passion to do it to the best of our ability. Business challenges, however, are also a necessary part of an increasing number of our working lives. Professionals will often have had limited training or experience in the business aspects of their work, and may well have limited interest in them – they will often be viewed as a means to an end. There is little that can be provided in an entirely classroom context that can prepare a young practising surveyor for suddenly finding him- or herself with a responsibility for running a part of a firm's operation.

The lack of emphasis on management training in our degree courses carries through into the lack of formal management development policies during our careers (despite the best intentions of CPD, it still tends to be concentrated on technical development). Our first promotions were achieved through technical prowess; we ended up in managerial positions with little consideration of whether we had an aptitude for it. We tried to stay outdoors and therefore didn't give enough emphasis to staff and business management. I generalise, of course!

Nowadays, many professional surveyors manage production tasks, visiting sites at the beginning to agree in outline the approach to be used, and when difficulties are encountered (in a similar way to a consulting engineer). The majority of their time will be spent on project management tasks, building client relationships; and marketing the profession to potential clients, guarding the role of the surveyor in the face of other

professions who will claim that advances in instrumentation and computers mean that professionals are no longer required for the work. Educational establishments will have to match their courses to these requirements: NVQ-type courses for the technicians; a professional qualification which will contain a mix of survey principles and management techniques for the professional surveyors. And, with technology advancing so rapidly, a single block of training at the start of a surveyor's career will not equip him or her for life: modular training will be a necessity.

These very real dual challenges, and the appropriate responses to them, must, of course, be fitted into an organisational and personal agenda (and budget) which has severe constraints in terms of time and resources available, especially for those small firms occupying niche positions. Whatever the inclination of the professional, the challenges have to be addressed if medium-term viability (and sanity!) is to be possible. How can professionals and their professional associations support themselves in this situation?

4. FIG'S WORK TO DATE

FIG has for many years recognised the challenges outlined above and their likely impact on the profession. In 1994, therefore, some ongoing work of Commission 1 (Professional Standards and Practice) was pulled together into a working group which prepared a paper entitled 'Management Matters' (Hoogsteden et al, 1998). The previous section draws on their work, and on this author's personal experience. At the same time, other elements in Commission 1 were revising/ creating what might most appropriately be described as policy guidance on various issues. Principal amongst this activity was the creation/ revision of two documents:

- The FIG Statement of Ethical Principles and Model Code of Professional Conduct (FIG, 1998-1); and
- The FIG Charter for Quality (FIG, 1998-2)

The Commission recognised that these were not the answer to the daily needs of a busy professional, but felt that it was important to create principles first (in the best surveying manner, to work from the whole to the part). In 1998, therefore, a Commission 1 working group on Business Practices was created with the remit:

- to promote the importance of business ethics, and to provide explanatory material on how ethics apply in cross-cultural business;
- to monitor and provide constructive comment and guidance on the impact of information technology, including the Internet, on business practice;
- to continue to research and promote how quality services and products can be provided, in particular the role that total quality management, quality assurance and quality awards criteria can play in the management of a business;
- to monitor and provide constructive comment on any ISO standards that may affect the management and business practice of surveying organisations, in collaboration with the FIG Task Force on Standards; and
- to review how international legislation impacts surveying businesses.

This work has been ongoing since 1998, with the profile perhaps being highest in the business ethics area, where a number of dilemmas were created to stimulate the debate that is vital in this field. The theoretical and practical framework within which the dilemmas sit can be found in Greenway (2000), and the dilemmas and the responses to them are posted on the Commission 1 part of the FIG web site. The range of responses (albeit from a small number of practitioners) has been interesting, as has the apparent conflict between many of the responses and national and international codes of conduct for surveyors. This is perhaps not surprising if the applying of ethical principles is seen as a set of filters through which decisions pass. Unpublished work at the Cranfield School of Management suggested that there were five filters: religion/ ideology, family and friends, corporate culture, national culture, and personal values; and that the personal values filter would always win through in cases of conflict.

In the area of quality, the working group has considered quality awards and *de jure* quality standards, their relevance to surveying firms, and the interlinking of quality and customer service. Parker (2000) presents some initial findings in this area (and also reproduces the FIG Charter for Quality).

Other areas considered by the working group as relevant to professional surveyors (especially those in private practice) have included international legislation, technological developments (particularly in the IT area) and more general managerial matters.

5. FUTURE PLANS

As previous sections of this paper have mooted, the survival (let alone flourishing) of surveying firms in the future will require investment in business issues as well as (and certainly not at the expense of) technical issues. The leaders of the firm (who may be small in number, in many firms, or a significantly-sized collective in a partnership) have to be clear what their individual and collective managerial strengths are, and who is performing what role. They also have to ensure that the business and professional principles on which the firm operates are clear. It is vital that this is done before a crisis hits – there will be no time to debate principles when everyone is handling a difficult situation. We must never forget that cynicism of professionals by the general public is high; that legislation and regulation (on health and safety and other grounds), particularly within the European Union, makes business flexibility (and profitability) increasingly difficult; that more and more data is produced by developing technology; and that the pressures on the planet increase (as so succinctly put by the Bathurst declaration – FIG 1999).

Recognising the vital role for practical, succinct support material, the working group has prepared a draft version of an FIG Guide on Business Practices. This is currently being discussed by interested professionals, with a view of publication in the next 12 months. The Guide currently consists of the following structure:

- Business idea/ plan
- Quality and customer service
- IT
- Professional ethics
- Legal frameworks

The key issues, whether they are training, practice, regulation or whatever, will be collated into a checklist for the busy professional. The key audience for the Guide is seen as professionals setting up in the business for the first time, but it should also be of use for all small and medium sized survey firms. A number of appendices, summarising key texts such as the Charter for Quality, will be attached to the Guide, which will be made widely available. It is designed to be of use around the world. It does not pretend to cover the detail of business issues in every country or region; instead, it highlights particular topics that a business needs to address and suggests likely sources of information as to further advice or instruction.

The working group considers that this Guide will be of significant use; the group has not found another document that covers the same ground for the survey profession, although a number of other documents cover elements of it.

6. FINAL WORDS

This paper has described how the world of the surveyor (as of all occupations) is becoming increasingly busy and complex, and the additional challenges and risks of failure (in all its guises) that this complexity creates. In what has often been seen as a vocational profession, it is vital that the professionals running survey firms are able to take on the dual role of professional and manager. Many texts and journals are available to provide targeted guidance on technical matters, but much less exists for the survey manager. FIG, as an international professional body, has recognised that it has a key role to play in filling this information gap, and has been working in a number of areas, attempting (with some difficulty) to stimulate debate and raise interest. A working group of FIG Commission 1 has now created a draft Guide on Business Practices and is seeking input to create a high quality and useful document. As many practitioners as possible are encouraged to input to the development and completion of the Guide, to make it a truly valuable resource for busy professional surveyors around the world.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Iain Greenway joined Ordnance Survey of Great Britain in 1986 after completing an M.A. in Engineering at Cambridge University and an M.Sc. in Land Survey at University College London. A variety of posts in geodetic and topographic survey followed, including short-term consultancies supporting land reform in eastern Europe. After completing an MBA at Cranfield University in 1994/95, which included a term studying at Macquarie University, Sydney, he worked for Ordnance Survey in strategic planning and pricing, sales and marketing, as well as completing a number of management consultancy inputs in Swaziland and Lesotho. He subsequently undertook a secondment to Her Majesty's Treasury, working on the improvement of public sector productivity in the UK.

Since the summer of 2000, Iain has been the Deputy Director of Ordnance Survey Ireland, responsible for much of the day-to-day management of a national mapping agency undergoing profound changes in status, structure, processes and culture.

Iain is a Chartered Surveyor (MRICS) and a member of the Chartered Institute of Marketing (MCIM). He is the RICS delegate to FIG Commission 1, Chair of the FIG Task Force on Standardisation and of Working Group 1.2 (Business Practices). He is also a member of the Management and Editorial Boards of the journal Survey Review.