

Talent - Are You Buying or Selling?

Earl Burkholder

Editor, Barry Phillips, asked me to write a short article for the May 2010 issue of Benchmarks. Yes, I'll be happy to provide information on several items but I am also certain that others have deserving ideas as well. I encourage each reader to put thoughts on paper (or screen) and to share them with NMPS Benchmark readers.

When I sat down to write this column, the first thing I did was to make a list of possible topics/items to discuss. Of the eight items on the list, I am including only two in this article – both are related to surveying education. First, I am eligible to retire July 1, 2010, and plan to do so. The second item is a question (the title of this article) that recently came up in class and fostered a good discussion. Regretfully, we ran out of class time and left a number of loose ends hanging. I invite your thoughts on the question.

Retirement: Yes, now is the time to pass the baton to others. I truly enjoy both teaching and surveying. The combination of surveying/teaching has been an ideal career for me. I continue to enjoy many facets of surveying (history, law, mathematics, astronomy, ethics, writing, geometry, drafting, science, programming, and working with people) and I enjoyed teaching because I was able to share in the learning experience with others. After earning a BS in 1973, I worked for an international engineering firm for 5 years before enrolling in graduate school at Purdue University. From there, I taught surveying at Oregon's Institute of Technology from 1980 to 1993 and was self-employed for 5 years before coming to teach at NMSU in August 1998. While self-employed I participated in a number of fascinating projects and enjoyed it. A person with more business acumen might have stayed with it but when the opportunity came to return to teaching at NMSU, I was delighted to do so.

I did two things while self-employed that carry over into my retirement – I started writing the book on the 3-D Global Spatial Data Model (GSDM) and I incorporated Global COGO, Inc. The book was published in 2008 and, although not setting any sales records, is doing well. The important issue is that the 3-D concepts are gathering traction in various disciplines (I wrote the book for surveyors) and I find myself spending more and more time responding to inquiries. While I was employed by NMSU, the students and teaching came first. But, after I retire I will be devoting more energy to my clients and to promoting modern 3-D spatial data practices. Global COGO is no longer dormant.

Talent – Are you (am I) Buying or Selling? In the big picture, we all buy and sell items, products, and services. The economies of the world are globally interconnected to the extent that our collective transaction decisions make huge differences for many people. Am I an economist? No, but we can all ask questions and, since I have no formal credentials in economics, I am at liberty to speculate – that is if we don't take ourselves too seriously.

The question about buying or selling talent was brought up in the context of today's surveying engineering graduate. Earning a BS degree is viewed as a milestone in one's career and I will always support/promote the value of a college education. However, it is not the degree but what one does with their talent (including knowledge gained while in college) that most directly affects realization of subsequent milestones,

e.g., licensure and eventual successful professional practice. Although the licensing process for surveyors is dictated by statute, there are many paths to a satisfying successful career. The career path for each of us is directly related to choices we make regarding the use/application of talent. In many cases we work diligently to develop our personal capabilities and we find meaningful application of our talents. I believe many of us relate to that in a very positive way. In other cases, we find it more expedient to buy and rely on the talent of others. For example, many successful professionals hire talented individuals, consultants, and subcontractors to do those things we do not have the time and/or the talent to do. Furthermore, we are all spoiled by our ability to buy the talent of those people who build computers, GPS equipment and other electronic gadgets. And, let's not forget the many talents embedded in the software and other products we buy. In my opinion, there is not a right way or a wrong way to make decisions with regard to buying and selling talent, but it can be argued that the circumstances in which we find ourselves are a direct consequence of those choices.

Although developing talent requires a lot of work and effort, I am convinced that our enhanced value in the marketplace justifies the time, energy, and money needed for us in the surveying profession to be competitive and successful. One of the most inspirational educational examples for me is the story of Jaime Escalante, the inter-city high school math teacher who was responsible for several hundred high school students taking and passing the advanced placement exam in calculus. His story is featured in the 1988 movie, "Stand and Deliver." It was not easy for him but he insisted that the students could not do it without *ganas*, a Spanish word for "motivation sufficient to act." Against enormous odds that included significant personal sacrifices, Escalante was able to inspire his students to accept the *ganas* challenge. As I look back on my teaching career, I wish I could have been more successful in sharing *ganas*. Of course, I have enjoyed the luxury of sharing in the learning with many students. For that I am grateful. Even so, I get the feeling that many of us are guilty of not fully understanding or appreciating the value of the talent we do have. Sometimes we sell ourselves much too short. It may not be a perfect analogy, but you should know that I have long appreciated the following poem.

"I bargained with Life for a penny,
And Life would pay no more,
However I begged at evening
When I counted my scanty store.
For Life is a just employer,
He gives you what you ask,
But once you have set the wages,
Why, you must bear the task.
I worked for a menial's hire,
Only to learn, dismayed,
That any wage I had asked of Life,
Life would have willingly paid."

Jessie Belle Rittenhouse (1869 - 1948)

Connecting the dots: What is the point of this article? My view is not unique but I invite readers to consider the impact that the digital revolution is having on the surveying profession. Lest I be misunderstood, I enthusiastically support surveying as the profession that is uniquely qualified to deal with property boundaries and legal descriptions. Before we focus on the use of new tools and technology we must agree to keep those and related issues front center. Land surveying must not be trivialized!
