



Connecting Generations

Does “*talkin’ about my generation*” remind you of the good old days (of long hair and rock’n’roll)? Or do you brace yourself for yet another pop-psychologist trying to make a dollar with re-packaged musings on understanding generational differences? Your response speaks volumes about your generation and the tell-tale characteristics that define it.

How do you define your generation? It is widely understood amongst the profession that most Australian surveyors are in a generation that is not described by a letter of the alphabet (i.e. either X, Y or Z-generation). This view is reinforced at many industry gatherings just by looking around; the numbers are with the “baby-boomers”. A number of interesting issues are highlighted here, including the need to work on our inter-generational relations. Many agree that improved communication will help build professional bridges across generation differences. So the issue becomes more about “how”, and indeed how in a tight labor market when surveying services are in high demand, and where surveyors, graduates, technicians, students, etc., disperse into allied and para-professions.

“Where is all the young blood?” is the ice-breaker that replaced small talk about the weather some time ago. It’s a very good question; even considering the shortage of all professions in our booming economy. On paper surveying is a proud profession that should be attractive to a modern, young person seeking a fulfilling career (or at least something to do during the week). It offers:

- a healthy indoor/outdoor work balance;
- access to high-tech instruments & cutting edge gadgets;
- use of multimedia;
- involvement in making important decisions about the physical development of our environment;
- access to professional support;
- potential to take responsibilities for solving complex problems for real clients;

And the list could go on, including the fact that many established businesses might be going cheap in 5-10 years from now. Yet the future generation/s of surveyors are seldom seen when surveyors gather.

In recent years the profession has tackled this situation on a number of fronts. For example, you may remember ISA’s “Open Up Your World to Surveying” careers video (late 1990s); or the ISV-SBV’s “Surveying in Primary Schools Competition” (early 2000s); or ISV’s regular young surveyors cadastral workshops (on-going). You may have also noticed student event sponsorship and support from Ultimate Positioning, CR Kennedy & Co., and others; or initiatives such as Victoria University’s Science and Engineering Challenge in Wangaratta (10-11 April 2008). The recently formed Task Force is the latest initiative forming to deal with aspects of this complex problem.

Yet the answer may be closer to home. Before breaking the ice at the next Institute event, take a moment to consider whether part of the solution is back at the office (or out in the field). Your existing staff and colleagues -and their networks- hold an important part of the solution. Their perceptions about working with you, especially the quality of experience and the value you add to their professional learning and development, will shape their career direction. A positive experience may inspire a flourishing profession. Negative experiences may drive someone away (and their extended networks who will hear all about it). Are you creating a work environment that nurtures people to excel and achieve great things?

This presents interesting challenges for a survey office, especially one trying to grow survey teams with a mixture of generations.

Since the term “Gen X” burst into popular culture circa 1990, debate and advice abounds on dealing with generational differences. Google “Generation Y” and count the number of hits (777,000). Of course generation classifications are general by nature. It is impossible to fit everyone into accurate categories based on birth year.

However, regardless of any affinity we have with a particular generation or recognized idiosyncrasies, the ABS Census defines generation classes as thus:

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Patron
Professor David de Kretser, AO,
Governor of Victoria