

So now you have a Land Surveying License, let's talk.

Your first thought is probably “now I’ve joined that elite group I’ve aspired to be a part of for so long.” Actually, I have two very different thoughts: 1.) The state has just found you minimally qualified to survey without direct supervision, and 2.) Now you are personally liable for your opinions and decisions along with those of the people whom you employ. Sorry I didn’t mean to be a buzz kill, but all you really have done is take another career step, and a big one. You probably have that itch now to prove to the rest of the surveying community that you belong here, and now you can act on all those great ideas you’ve had in the past that your bosses shot down. Admit it; the idea of going out on your own is already bouncing around in your head like a pinball. And, that’s alright, but why don’t you take a minute and listen to what a crusty old surveyor has to say. I promise not to crush that dream, but I’d like to share a bit of wisdom from some of the people that helped me through the years and from some of the mistakes I made when I ignored their advice.

First and most importantly, be in this for the money. Anything less is a hobby with adverse and serious liability. You are a professional, one who advises and expresses opinions based on knowledge and experience. The very nature and consequence of your actions are so serious that it mandates state licensure and regulation in regard to the public’s safety and welfare. The experience and knowledge that you bring to the table, along with the liability you accept, has value. You will hear a lot about “value based fees”, they generally apply to the value of the property; with me I place the value on myself and what I bring to the table. I will assume that you are like most Americans, and unless you are independently wealthy, your livelihood will come from your work. Just don’t live in the moment think long term needs including retirement and insurance on your never ending liability that continues past your retirement. Most start out today as solo, so set your fees to generate a profit (beyond your income - real savings), without killing yourself to get it. Remember, you are better than the ordinary employee; you will get your work done faster, with few problems; but that should not decrease the fee for the service. You are solo so you don’t need every job. Be selective to a niche’ of what you want to do. Do a good job and get it done when you say you will. **KEEP YOUR WORD!** Remember every action you take is marketing.

Second, have a plan. Whether it is a life plan and/or a business plan; actually, you should have several plans short-term through long-term. Remember a business plan (as life) isn’t just about going into business, but how to stay in business. A life plan includes family, kids, their education, wellbeing, housing, health, retirement – AND how you will pay for it all. Hire an accountant. Seek his advice and follow it. Run everything by them from the size of the truck you buy to hiring part time help. Hire an Attorney. Seek his advice and follow it. (Sound familiar) Obtain their help in determining your mode of operation and setting base contracts, and how to collect fees. Set a minimum fee to take a job and demand a contract and a retainer. Work Lump Sum when you can. Be in charge of your finances, send clear policies to your clients and enforce them all the time. You are running a business, and it “isn’t a banking business.” Join your chamber and at least one local organization, Rotary, etc. It gives you legitimacy and develops relationships. Become involved in other areas – Little League or whatever. People need to know you. Remember “its not who you know, it’s who knows you.” Plan and take vacations. Give your clients advance notice and leave!

Third, Big is not always better. If you don’t want to do the damn job, just say, “NO, I’m not interested.” It’s an advantage of having your freedom and you don’t have an employee machine to feed. With an ever-growing company comes every growing responsibility and liability. A professional should be personally involved in a project. I’ve worked for the big boys and its “get the new job, the new client in the door” and then pass them off to the producers while you run after the next new prospect - It sucks. Do you believe George Washington or Henry David Thoreau ran 5 field crews? No way, they were professionally involved in everything that was happening on a survey. Big is nothing more than a machine and it lacks the one element that is most important to a successful survey business –

personal professional involvement with the project and most importantly the client. If you serve a community, as most of us do, then you need personal relationships and word of mouth – that comes from hands on involvement. At some point, I'm not sure if its 2 or 3 or maybe 5 crews, the business starts to own you. It becomes a hungry beast needing constant feeding. You find yourself taking jobs you do not want, at lower prices than should be charged just to feed the beast. But, then solo has its worries too; if you become ill or just want some time off who answers the phones and returns calls, makes copies? I am of the belief that the small 2 to 6 man operations that rely heavily on **“OPTIMIZING”** technology and charge for it, have the best return. If you buy the equipment know how to get every penny out of it. Training is like marketing – money well spent.

Finally, and of high importance, the surveyor down the street is not your enemy, competitor maybe, but not the enemy. Before I fall in the downward spiral that plague so many of calling other surveyors names, belittling their efforts to make a living and pre-judge the quality of their work I will offer my hand in help and friendship - I ask for nothing in return. I will refer clients to fellow surveyors, give them information and even lend equipment. When things get really busy, I wish I had more guys to send work out to, because there are a lot of jobs I just don't want, or I can't get to in a reasonable time. I want the client to get their needs met and timely. I **DO NOT** make enemies; I make life long business associates. I want to surround myself with other surveyors who think like me - This is how I make a living. I can't do that looking over my shoulder and neither can anyone else. It is why those who complain the loudest have the problems. Oh there are plenty of naysayers, guys with their arms wrapped around all their eggs, protecting "their" stuff-turf. What a sad way to run a business. I guess I just think and act different. My fellow surveyors, new, old or moonlighter are not my enemy, don't make them yours.

I could go on and on but at some point it is just rambling. So I leave you with those thoughts and this. Life is short. You can live it in a cubicle, yelling for deadlines, being beat-up on the phone, missing your kids baseball games – or, you can have your coffee in the woods. Don't sweat the little things, or those things outside your sphere of influence. You are here for a reason, the job will get done – just do it right and turn a nice profit.

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