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How Have Surveying and GIS Changed in a Down Economy?

■ GIS JANET says ...

As I write this, we have just waved a hearty goodbye to 2009 and are welcoming 2010. And even though you are reading this article in 2010, I am sure you, as I, are still feeling the effects of a down economy and all the changes it brought in 2009. Yes, change is inevitable, but the changes we all saw and felt during the past year have been unprecedented in most of our professional careers. So let's take a moment to reflect on how our professional lives changed during the past year, how we adapted, and what we can do to make our next nine months productive and profitable.

Low Bid Wins

One of the most glaring changes was what seemed to be a departure from quality. In other words, the lowest price won the next project, regardless of quality. This new form of bidding required a quickly implemented strategy to salvage bids and proposals from being tossed in the trash. I wholeheartedly agree that competition keeps us honest, but only if your competitors are offering the exact same product and service you are. So, time will tell if this "low bid wins" strategy produces a win-win situation for both clients and vendors. For the time being, I will keep my focus on producing the product the client requires, with a hefty dose of quality built in.

Staff Departures

Saying goodbye to colleagues is never easy, but it is especially difficult saying goodbye to professionals who are well educated, specifically trained, keenly experienced, and costly to recruit. And it's even sadder when you know they don't have many choices for finding employment. Of all the changes so far, I think the departure of professional staff is the hardest to accept; it's tough to find a silver lining.

Having fewer trained staff members has forced me to investigate and leverage technology, including webinars, GoToMeeting, and video conferencing to communicate and do work in a way that I have not thought about before. Technology is not an equal exchange for skilled people, as it doesn't allow for professional experience, but it is a productive place to start when you don't have many choices. ▶

Embrace a new attitude of maintaining quality in everything you do, learning new software, and including other group members on your next project.

■ SURVEYOR RANDY says ...

The recession of 2009 did not derail the "intersecting" train, but it certainly took some of the steam out of the locomotive. As the number of new opportunities and projects decreased and the fees and profitability for those projects decreased as well, intersecting has become more of a challenge for surveyors and GIS professionals.

I'm sure there have been a number of cases where each profession attempted to circumvent the knowledge and expertise of the other and perform—by itself—all tasks on a project. I doubt that scenario has had great success, but it has probably helped some firms keep their doors open and their noses above the water.

I don't believe the above scenario has fostered a win-win situation for our professions or our clients. As professionals, I would hope that the biggest loser would be the profitability of our professions, not the quality of the product we deliver to our clients. As business people, I would hope that the quality of our services and products is not compromised but that we have reduced the scope and quantity of what we are performing for the lesser fee.

But from my observations during my 39-year surveying career and several other lesser recessions, I'm not sure that is the case. I would say that, the majority of the time, surveyors have just been willing to sell their time at a much cheaper rate, rather than face the prospect of producing an inferior product or service. That would seem to be a win for the client, even if it is a short-term win. Still, if the fees for work are reduced drastically, doesn't the quality, quantity, and completeness of the data have to be compromised, at least to some degree?

Unfortunately, this mindset of offering the same services for inadequate compensation makes us the biggest loser. When clients can receive a service or product that is almost as good as what they received in the past for a substantially lower cost, it becomes a win for the client but a loss for the surveyor. And a win-lose scenario is certainly not the best way to conduct business, even during the toughest economy many of us have ever experienced.

I can't speak specifically to the GIS profession, but I would ▶

The good news is that much of the surveying and GIS work that was desperately needed 12 or 18 months ago will still be needed as the economy rebounds.

► **Less Intersecting**

As potential projects became increasingly scarce throughout the year, it was easy to understand why holding leads a little closer to the vest became more acceptable, especially in companies that use department or group profit centers. A lead, project, and revenue for the GIS group showed that we were profitable and, therefore, worthy of existence. This might be the perfect scenario for any lone wolf group, but it really doesn't foster the concept of "intersecting" or using company-wide resources, which is always more profitable in the end. It is especially disappointing during hard times when intersecting is just what is needed to pull together a creative project approach, share hard/software, and further develop a mutual trust between departments or groups.

The year 2009 certainly had its challenges, but one of the reasons we celebrate New Year's is to say good-bye to the old and hello to the new. So embrace the New Year with a new attitude of maintaining quality in everything you do, learning new software, and including other group members on your next project. And maybe, just maybe, 2010 will be your best year ever! ▼



JANET JACKSON, GISP, is certified as a GIS professional and heads McKim & Creed's GIS activities.

► think all professions have been keeping the work they have secured within their own groups or company in order to retain staff and survive until more work is available. Fortunately, the good news is that much of the surveying and GIS work that was desperately needed 12 or 18 months ago—but that has been put on hold until money is more readily available—will still be needed as the economy rebounds. The country's infrastructure needs have not disappeared or decreased. The water, sanitary sewer, and storm sewer infrastructure needs will have to be a priority in the coming years. This is just one area in which much additional data on existing systems is needed and that provides some excellent opportunities for the surveying and GIS professions to intersect.

Hopefully most of us are surviving the recession, although many of us have sustained some significant flesh wounds and a broken bone or two. With 2009 behind us, let's count on 2010 being the first year on the road to recovery for us and everyone else! ▼



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While Janet and Randy may not see eye-to-eye on all surveying and GIS issues, they do work together on a daily basis, respect each other's perspective and point of view, and attempt to "intersect" their professions whenever possible. Randy and Janet invite you to submit your questions to "Intersect." Contact them via email at intersect@mckimcreed.com or at 919-233-8091.
