



# CATCHING THE BATON

The first leg thus far

**BY LIAM KADEL**

There have been many changes since “Passing the Baton” was published in the July/August 2019 issue of the IRWA magazine. While the shift to remote work has made right of way projects more challenging, it has also presented another opportunity to discuss the topic of turnover in right of way.

“Passing the Baton” gave excellent insight to some of the agencies and larger companies alike in discussing the large turnover in the ROW industry. Indeed, “the right of way profession is experiencing a loss of professional expertise as the Baby Boomers retire,” but the term “loss” feels amiss in describing the opportunity we should all be taking advantage of. As we continue to move from analog to digital in terms of using more technologies and remote work, there is an aspect that cannot be substituted with an app or wireless connection. While there is value in training manuals and incentive programs, the mentor/mentee relationship is the foundation for the next generation of ROW professionals.

I can only speak from my three and a half years of experience in ROW so far, but when I joined my first project, I was one of four people under the age of 30. There were jokes between the different generations, but those subtle jests quickly became a point of bifurcation instead of strength. For some, the thought of young people having a passion for the ROW industry was not believable. How could a generation come into this ROW world being so different from our older teammates? How could a generation that was so tech-based be remotely interested in such a niche industry? While many of my colleagues were welcoming, some were resistant to the idea of passing along their industry tips and tricks to a bunch of young punks. Those of us that fell into the Millennial or Gen Z categories were quickly written off in any ROW capacity and only valued for our technical knowledge and printer troubleshooting.

For others, they recognized an opportunity to invest in the future of ROW by establishing a mentorship with a generation that is constantly told they are not dedicated enough. A handful of individuals made it their mission to pass along as much as they could before moving off a project, or for some, retiring. They made it a point to get us into IRWA classes right away and challenged us to contribute to meetings beyond getting the lunch order correct. They brought us into conversations where “relocation by committee” was being practiced and genuinely wanted our perspective on every scenario. This bred a confidence that everyone on the team was on equal footing and created trust from the PM down to the techs.

This is where a job quickly turned into a passion. Classes and seminars supplemented the years of experience and knowledge that were gained from working closely with individuals with 30+ years in the field. Our value grew from “can you open this PDF?” to seriously weighing in on decision-making and process implementation. This was because of mentors that took the time to impart their experiences and schools of thought. The beauty of these mentorships was that they quickly became symbiotic. Both generations brought different value to the table and were making equal contributions to one and other. This charged younger individuals with a sense of empowerment and an earnest effort to soak up as much as possible from their mentors. For the mentors, they had an audience who wanted to learn and who could be trusted with the next wave of challenges in the industry. It was an atmosphere that we built on trust and effort.

The question now is the current times of working remotely and limited workspaces, how do we continue to maintain mentor/mentee relationships? How do we carry on the passing of knowledge and experience in a time where we no longer stay in the office brainstorming or getting coffee and getting feedback on the go? There are manuals and classes that can augment these relationships, but they cannot replace the human connection. Since it is not as if we can all pair off mentor to mentee, we need to somehow harness the classroom-like feel that we received while in the office, and in conferences and meetings. Perhaps it is weekly virtual brainstorms akin to an open discussion where the up-and-coming generations in ROW can get time with some of the more seasoned individuals. Maybe we are getting close to being able to meet for (socially distanced) coffee and a chat. In my experience, those who have retired are very generous with their time and are willing to still discuss issues and topics as they come up, but it would not hurt to take advantage of the time we do have with those who are still active in the industry.

There is a small window of time to generate these relationships with those that will be retiring soon, but we are fighting a strong headwind that will be hard to overcome with just phone calls and emails. This summer’s IRWA conference was a litmus test in many areas including remote capabilities on a large scale and determining how things have changed interpersonally over the last year.

In terms of passing and catching the baton, it feels like we are still on the first leg of the 400m race. There is a long way to go before a large part of our team retires, but we are on the right track. We are just out of the starting blocks and into our first three steps. Our first step is strong and steady; it is led by those the veterans of ROW. Our second step is agile and flexible; it is powered by the innovation of the up-and-coming ROW generations. Our third step will be the strongest and fastest; it is the peak of the mentor/mentee relationship that will power the rest of the race in the ROW industry to come. ★



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