



BRIDGING THE GAP

Mentorship is key

BY DARRYL ROOT, R/W-RAC

Mentoring is essential for any industry. This is particularly true for the right of way industry and the practice of relocation. An effective mentoring program helps to ensure that institutional knowledge is not lost in addition to encouraging new agents. Effective communication between retiring or resigning experienced agents and newer employees helps to facilitate a smooth transition of workloads and lessen frustrations.



However, recent national trends threaten to derail mentoring and other programs designed to preserve and transfer existing experience and knowledge to younger workers. Unfortunately, the right of way industry is not immune to these trends. Currently, the right of way industry is experiencing the twin phenomena of the “Silver Tsunami” and the “Great Resignation” (The “Silver Tsunami” refers to older, more experienced workers leaving the workforce, while the “Great Resignation” generally refers to workers who are unsatisfied with their current job and leave to look for another position).

According to Forbes Magazine, the Pew Research Center states that nearly 30 million baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) left their jobs by late 2020. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated retirements due to associated health reasons or simply because the pandemic provided workers an opportunity to reflect on their careers and decide retirement or another job was the best option.

All indications point to these trends continuing, and private right of way consulting firms as well as public agencies are scrambling to create knowledge management systems. Whether by formal or informal initiative, organizations are hoping to stem the tide of the “Silver Tsunami” by capturing both tacit knowledge (knowledge and skill gained through agent experience) and explicit knowledge (knowledge that exists in some written form, like a right of way manual and other written procedures).

Long-time employees have learned to combine that experiential expertise and explicit knowledge to be successful in the right of way industry. Transferring that expertise to new agents is difficult, especially in the relocation field. Capturing and storing the tacit knowledge is also difficult as it is situation based and requires in-depth discussions with

employees who may have problems recalling the details of the specific application of the relocation knowledge that led to a successful relocation. In addition to faulty memories, many of these seasoned employees may be unwilling or not interested in sharing their knowledge as they walk out the door. That’s why it is essential for right of way consulting firms and public agencies alike to develop an effective mentoring program that captures this tacit knowledge in real time in a nonthreatening, personal and informal way.

No right of way manual knowledge can give a beginning relocation agent the necessary instructions to successfully handle all relocation cases. In other words, “all of the answers are not in the book.” Having a reliable resource to turn to who “has been there and done that” can supply beginning agents with both the expertise and encouragement needed to increase the chances for a successful relocation.

Sharing real-life case studies with a mentee can bridge the gap between right of way manual instructions and an effective resolution of a relocation scenario. Relocation cases are extremely varied, and the issues can be very complex. Having the benefit of someone’s experience with specific types of relocation, especially non-residential relocations, can’t be overestimated. Specific technical knowledge about different types of businesses and how the relocation regulations under the Uniform Act apply to them can be invaluable.

However, thoughtful planning is necessary before engaging in any mentoring program. Any mentoring program should set clear goals for both the mentor and mentee. What do both parties expect out of the program? How often and for how long will they meet? How are mentors and mentees matched? Is the mentor paired with more than one mentee? Establishing expectations and boundaries can help answer these questions and ensure a rewarding program.

Obviously, there are a variety of ways to set up a mentoring program, but both agencies and private consulting firms should create a mentoring program that meets their needs. 🌟



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