

Evaporating Professionalism

Some fifteen years ago I was president of The Netherlands Society for Photogrammetry. At that time there was some concern that photogrammetry was taught only at university and not at other levels of professional or vocational education. This was seen as a problem because a large part of the large-scale mapping projects were based on photogrammetry, whereas the operators doing the mapping work were not educated as photogrammetrists. There were some short training courses and in-house training facilities in some of the companies or state organisations involved in mapping, but these were generally insufficient to give the trainees a profound understanding of the complete mapping process. Even worse was the fact that the advanced concepts and theories for quality analyses and quality criteria developed by geodesists and photogrammetrists in the 1970s and early 1980s were often seen as esoteric academic exercises and not as valuable tools. These concepts were hardly ever taught in the training courses for photogrammetric operators and their direct supervisors.

The yearly required numbers of freshly educated photogrammetrists were too low to develop curricula at polytechnics and other educational levels. Mapping production tasks have been exported to low-income countries with the effect that the need for photogrammetrists has decreased even further. Consequently, The Netherlands's™ community of photogrammetrists is now too small to maintain professional standards; the expertise and knowledge is disappearing. Mapping services are now often offered by companies that hardly employ properly educated photogrammetrists. They do not have staff who understand the mapping specifications for the products they should deliver. The client organisations no longer have sufficient capacity to formulate the specifications for the mapping projects they want to outsource, or the capacity to check the products of the mapping companies.

Organisations have professional managers who have been educated and trained in management styles and methods, in business economics and business law, etc. They often serve for a period of five or six years before they make their next career step. Therefore, they manage organisations with criteria of cost-efficiency and/or profit maximisation at a time horizon of three to four years. They hardly understand the value of quality requirements and therefore they are not willing to invest high-quality data that will serve as base data in a Global Spatial Data Infrastructure (GSDI) environment. For mapping projects they will invite companies with the lowest production costs. It is true that the prices of these projects have dropped by about 60% over the last ten years; however, the long-term costs have not been estimated. The fact that The Netherlands is losing its photogrammetric expertise may cost us dearly in the long run when we find out that large-scale input data for geo-databases are of a poor quality. With time we will sense the effect of the present business approaches but nobody will be able to explain what went wrong. How do we make such a future problem clear to those who are presently in the driving seats of the organisations and companies producing large-scale geo-data that should serve as the fundament of our future GSDI?