

# Leap Forward

One of the main topics discussed at the Survey and GIS Summit preceding the ESRI User Conference 2006 (see my report in the October issue) was the reluctance of youngsters to join the surveying profession. The declining influx made many afraid that the profession would become extinct, a fear that is certainly not idle: in the US the average age of the surveyor would appear to be 57. What should be done to reverse the trend?

## Student is Right

To answer the above question it is necessary to understand why today's students stay away from surveying and do not choose the profession as a career opportunity. The simplest way out is by pointing an accusing finger at some of the supposed generic "evil" characteristics of today's youngsters: selfishness, laziness and an unwillingness to stretch mind and muscles. However, I cannot believe this approach makes much sense. Blaming the younger generation for their disagreeable behaviour and unpleasant attitude has been a leisure pursuit of the parent generation throughout the ages. There is a saying that the customer is always right. I paraphrase it: the student is always right. If a student is reluctant to join a profession or to enrol in a (university) study programme, this is not so much a problem of the student but more a problem of the profession or the university. It is apparently failing to communicate to the young man and woman that they are giving the cold shoulder to a profitable occupation.

## Status and Fame

Many surveys have been conducted to determine the decisive factors in young people selecting a certain course of study or profession, and these all boil down to one basic drive: a deep-rooted desire for status and fame. Fortunately, most people at a quite early age develop enough of a sense of reality to know that becoming a celebrity such as a movie star, soccer player or rock star is open only to the happy few. Thus it remains only something to dream of, and as a shadow of the dream the hobby lingers on. Nevertheless, status is so fundamental a component of human existence that we try to attain it within the limited surrounds of our environment, of which our profession is a major part.

## Plenty Alternatives

Once, the surveyor belonged to the local celebrities, along with the doctor, the lawyer and the schoolteacher. But, like the teacher, the surveyor has taken a tumble; his status has crumbled and the profession lost prominence and glamour. As a result, these professions are not so attractive anymore to young people, and only those with real guts will opt for them. After all, there are plenty of alternatives available, alternatives that demand the same or even less effort to get there. No wonder so many want to become managers: managers can afford a bigger house, a larger car, or even two, and more expensive annual holidays. Indeed, the reward system within all segments of society is such that the more people one has under one's control, the higher one's income. A technical specialist like a surveyor belongs to that category of professionals who will be likely to remain a manager of tools, and whose bank account will show lower figures than that of a colleague who manages human resources. And although there are plenty of examples of youngsters opting for studies in the engineering sciences, closer examination reveals that these are associated with technology ranked high within the youth-culture setting.

## Double Check

The road to becoming a licensed surveyor is paved with many barriers that repel potential novices. For example, in the US the surveying profession is self-regulating and to become licensed as a professional surveyor (P.S.) one has basically to follow a four-tier path, two consisting of exams. Most students take the first of these, on fundamentals of surveying, right before college graduation or soon after, while the technical information they have studied is still fresh in their minds. Brave students! They are obviously so motivated to become a surveyor that they are willing twice to sit similar exams. Why is it not possible to enter the profession through a university degree from listed, accredited geomatics institutes? Why the cumbersome double-check?

## Archaic and Static

The specifications for both exams, as from October 2005, show that the Professional Surveyor has to prepare for a limited set of tasks mainly related to data acquisition and processing and legal principles. A meagre 2% of the questions in both exams relate to geographical information systems. Such a programme must to many students appear both archaic and static. In addition, the requirements for licensing are not standardised across the country. They vary slightly from state to state and territory to territory, and even the titles differ: in addition to Professional Surveyor (P.S.) one may become Professional Surveyor and Mapper (P.S.M.), Land Surveyor (L.S.) or Professional Land Surveyor (P.L.S.). Is this still a feasible arrangement in an era of nomads? Today families in the US move on average every four to five years, often "out of state". And, as a final observation, is a professional with an average age of 57 not a rather ineffectual role model for youngsters?

The low influx of youngsters into the land-surveying profession in the US is a reality; many acknowledge that the trend has to be reversed and revitalisation is needed. We need a big leap forward.