



Canadian Institute of
Quantity Surveyors

Institut canadien des
économistes en construction

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM

"Meet the People"



Susan Neil, PQS(F), MRICS

TITLE: Executive Vice President

COMPANY: Hanscomb Limited

YEARS IN THE PROFESSION: 31

What are some of the most important skills required to succeed in your job?

Although quantity surveying requires a technical competency, to be a trusted advisor of what are often limited funds, you have to have strong people skills. You have to have patience, integrity, ethics and objectivity. You have to be able to handle not only your own stresses but the stress levels of others, keeping in mind that you are responsible for planning and controlling someone else's money.

Pressures are constant on the projects we work on and managing expectations is critical. It has taken me time to appreciate that the best way to manage conflict is to face it directly and not take things personally. We are in the business of giving opinions and not everyone will agree with you. Sometimes you won't get it right. How you respond is as important as why it happened.

Taking ownership for your actions goes a long way in building trust with others. Even as a leader, it is important to acknowledge that you may have missed or misinterpreted something. People respect this more than someone who tried to deflect blame. On the flip side, when someone else makes mistakes, you should treat them as you would want to be treated. Again, it is about respect and this is critical for managing clients and mentoring staff.

When staff make mistakes, we expect them to learn and not repeat them. We also want staff to know that we have their backs and will work together to develop a solution. As a leader, you have to be prepared to take the upfront responsibility with the client. To do this effectively, you need to understand as much about the situation as possible and this requires full disclosure from your staff. Staff need to know that they can trust revealing errors or issues to you. You don't want staff hiding information from you.

Staff know that I don't have all the answers, but I am resourceful and always prepared to roll up my sleeves to figure things out. Having a growth mindset is key. The world is changing at such a rapid pace and so much information





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continued from previous page

is available that it is almost impossible to look smart all the time. In our industry, materials and systems continue to advance; government is testing out different models of financing because replacing infrastructure is so costly; computer aided programs allow us to measure quantities from a simple PDF of a drawing; work is shared between our offices because it can be transferred electronically; and, work is expected to be turned around almost immediately because of technology. To respond to these changes, we have to open our minds to new ways of approaching challenges and finding solutions. It isn't always about what you know, but about what you can learn to elevate what you know.

As we hire more young professionals, I am becoming increasingly aware of how much I can learn from this generation.

They look at the world differently and come with a different set of skills and mindsets. I find that when we collaborate, I learn as much from them as they do from me.

How did you end up choosing this profession?

I pretty much fell into quantity surveying. It is one of the best kept secrets, which is a shame.

When I was in high school, career paths were pretty traditional - doctor, lawyer, engineer, teacher. I was a strong student but had no idea what I wanted to do. I didn't have a specific area of talent or strength. I was good in a lot of subjects; particularly math, sciences, art and English.

My mother raised me to be independent and said that I should never rely on someone else to take care of me and that I would be happier in life and any relationship if I could stand on my own two feet. She believed dentistry would allow me to juggle being a mother if I chose to raise a family. With no real direction, I set out to Western University to study biology as a first step to dentistry.





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continued from previous page

In my graduating year, my choice began to weigh heavily and I realized I did not want to look in people's mouths for the rest of my life. It is a fabulous profession, but it wasn't for me. Unfortunately, I still didn't know what was for me.

A friend suggested architecture because I was good in math, sciences and art. This was something I had never considered. I applied and was accepted at Ryerson. By second year, I knew I was not an architect, but I loved the industry and thought that I could go the route of Project Manager. I also figured that this choice would give me flexibility to transfer my knowledge to other industries if finding work became difficult. In my fourth and graduating year, my construction economics professor announced that his company was hiring. I had no construction related experience, so I applied and started my career as a junior quantity surveyor at Hanscomb. 31 years later, I still believe it was one of the best decisions I have ever made.

I tell this story because so many young people leave high school not knowing what they want to do as a career. It can be pretty daunting. The key for me was to expand on the areas I was interested in and open my mind to opportunities while still moving forward. Even though I changed direction, I was still moving forward and built on most of what I had developed. Some ask, "what did your B.Sc. in Biology do to help you at Hanscomb?" and I would argue that I learned how to digest a lot of information, analyze data and formulate independent ideas. I also had an incredible time away from home and made friendships and connections to last a life time.

What keeps you interested in your job/this profession?

After 31 years at Hanscomb, I still love what I do. No two days are alike, and no two projects are exactly the same. I am always learning something new. The construction industry may be fairly traditional, but technology, practices and procurement continue to develop and evolve. The projects are interesting, and the teams assembled to deliver them are talented and fun to work with. I know many who really do think of their jobs as work and a means to an end but for me being a quantity surveyor and holding an executive position at Hanscomb is a career and an integral





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continued from previous page

part of my life. It isn't work; it's a passion.

Because of my position, I must interface with individuals on various levels that hold high positions and have remarkable careers. As a result, my world has broadened and my network is growing, and I am continually reminded of the incredible talent that I am fortunate to interface with regularly because of my profession, experience and title. I truly believe you are impacted by the people you keep company with and over the years, so many have influenced me in such positive ways. Of course, not all have been positive, but I have learned as much, if not more, from these encounters.

Any special skills that you think came in handy when you first started out in this profession?

Early in my career, my days were filled with interpreting drawings, measuring quantities and pricing material and systems. To be a quantity surveyor you have to be able to conceptualize how a set of plans might be constructed. You have to be able to sift through details and find the relevant information. You have to be able to frame questions clearly to get answers on tough design elements and when getting quotes to ensure you are getting the information you need. You also have to have patience to go through what can sometimes be an overwhelming amount of information.

There was a fair bit of repetition at a junior level but with the diverse portfolio of work at Hanscomb, I wasn't bored. Still, I wondered how long I could stay interested in measuring and pricing quantities.

I soon discovered that the important thing was to see the patterns that develop between projects. This was key to developing my skills and my career. To rise as a quantity surveyor, you apply what you repeatedly have seen and fill in the gaps for what is yet to be anticipated or developed. Each project is like a puzzle and it requires an analytical mind to put it together and in many instances, be able to separate it in various buckets to help clients make informed





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continued from previous page
cost decisions.

I spent my early years observing how my peers, supervisors and clients approached projects, analyzed data, and summarized information. We all have our own way of thinking and doing things but there is so much to learn from others and I took various elements that worked for me and developed them. I also watched how people handled themselves in front of others. I watched body language, listened to tone and language. I have worked with some remarkable people who could set anyone at ease and develop a solid trust even during challenging situations. This is magic.

Despite our world being technology driven, and the profession of quantity surveying being technically founded, the greatest benefit we can bring to a project is a personal connection. Clients want to know that we understand the project objectives and that the budget is well planned, and dollars are being spent wisely. After all, no matter what anyone says, money matters. Being technically competent is one thing, but having the soft skills to develop trust takes you to another level with any client and any person. I have also found that a sense of humour can go a long way to building strong relationships. Who said work can't be fun?

Did you have a mentor helping you achieve your career goals?

While I am proud of the career that I have carved out for myself, I owe much of it to the good fortune of having landed my first job at Hanscomb. I have been treated well, have worked with some of the best in the profession and have been mentored by several key individuals over the course of my career; people I respect and now consider friends.

I can remember in my first few years being invited to the National Club in Toronto with Hanscomb's CFO at the time. She was a strong woman who saw a future in me at Hanscomb and wanted to elevate women in the industry.





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continued from previous page

Her taking the time to express interest in my career development was a key turning point in how I viewed my role at Hanscomb.

Working in a male dominated industry, profession and company has been surprisingly effortless as I look back on my career. Maybe age has dulled my recollection, but I honestly believe I have been treated equally at Hanscomb and in the industry over the years. Opportunities have been there for the taking and respect has been earned and returned. I have had children and have a great family life while holding an executive position at Hanscomb. My goal is to elevate other women who can enjoy the same benefits that I have.

Over the years, I have had Seniors, Managers, Directors, CFOs and the President of the company mentor me in various aspects of my careers. Some of it has been related to quantity surveying, but most of it has been focused on leadership and the operations of the company. Running a company is not easy and requires an entirely different set of skills for which I was not trained. My mentors at Hanscomb have eased my transition and been a significant support.

Would you recommend a career as a quantity surveyor? Explain

I would strongly recommend a career as a quantity surveyor.

The work is interesting and challenging. The projects change and you work on multiple projects at one time. The opportunities for learning are endless and the industry is well connected.

Entry into the profession is not difficult. There is no formal post-secondary program dedicated to the quantity surveyor in North America and there are varying ways of becoming one. Some colleges offer architectural and engineering programs that cover a majority of the curriculum required with some supplemental courses that can





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continued from previous page

be taken while working as a junior. Some quantity surveyors come up from the trades and learn on the job, taking courses to get their professional designation. As education requirements become more extensive for most professions, quantity surveying remains open to many to develop their own path.

In terms of employment opportunities, there are many options. You can work for a contractor, a project management firm, government, or a quantity surveying firm. There are large publicly traded companies that are exciting for those who are looking for a large corporate culture, as well as medium to small companies that are independently owned and have their own culture with opportunities for ownership. There is no 'one size fits all' and they all have their benefits.

For me, ownership has been a big factor in my career satisfaction. I enjoy a leadership position and helping shape the future of Hanscomb. It is challenging and comes with risk and stress, but it has been very rewarding.

I am proud of our company and our staff, who have shown incredible resiliency and commitment during these unprecedented times. If this pandemic has shows us anything, it is that our profession is necessary, valued and highly functional under remote working conditions. Like many of our peers and colleagues, we have been experiencing a high volume of work even as the world started shutting down. Clients and authorities have been reaching out to us for cost advice and support, in particular for major infrastructure projects like health care and transit. Even with the advent of technology and estimating software advances, it is clear to me that the role of the quantity surveyor is so much more and will continue to adapt to an ever changing world.