



Field Aversion

What's up with designers who just refuse to go out to their sites?

Even in the most preliminary stages of a project plan—long before you can get yourself into trouble for saying the wrong thing and before a poor on-site decision can be made or avoided—why won't they go? Even when it's an urban site that's maybe only a 25-minute drive away? How is it better to spend four hours on the phone with six people trying to sort out a detail when a short drive each way and a 30 minute on-site chat could deliver a definitive conclusion to the pesky problem?

Every time I bring this up, people start nodding their heads in agreement and interrupting each other to share stories about footings that had to be redesigned six times or how a manhole ended up seven ft. in elevation away from the tie-in "because that's where it was shown on the drawings," or how a soils investigation was done in the wrong location.

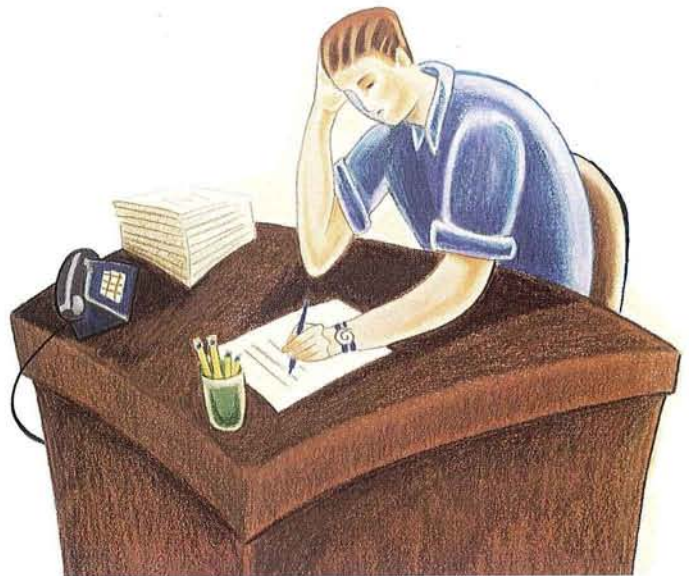
I recently cancelled a site meeting because the engineer of record wouldn't attend, when I called the other key invitee he said, "I'm not surprised. We beg them to come out, but they say they're too busy." They are too busy to visit their job sites, but not too busy to redesign something five times on the computer because—as we all know—the computer is never wrong.

My first exposure to a major civil project was during the construction of Phase I of the Coquihalla Highway. I learned a lot as I watched contractors push a major highway through 115 km. of almost virgin bush. The biggest lesson came when I saw bridge piers cast about eight ft. higher than the approaching road grade because the designers with Bridge Branch hadn't spent quality time with Survey... you get the idea.

A few years ago, a project manager who was frustrated by the performance of her resident engineer asked me if a contractor had ever lied to me. It sent me into a fit of hysterical laughter. Why would anyone say something they know will make them look bad if there's no reason to think they'll be caught?

I've been asking myself where this mentality that says you can design a construction project on a computer comes from. Could it hail back to the dark ages when it only took two years to get a P. Eng. (in B.C.) and employers could start charging their EIT's out as P. Eng.s by pulling them back into the office and assigning design work? Could it be that some designers are just uncomfortable in the field, never having spent much time there, and don't understand the limits of a given piece of equipment or how long some tricky tasks actually take?

Maybe it's the emphasis on "soft skills" training, like people and project management, at the expense of hard-core design



and inspection training. If anything, your soft skills will never be better-honed than when you are in the field facing a sticky situation and dealing with people who may initially distrust you.

I'm not saying that CAD, digital photos, e-mail and video clips are evil—but there is no substitute for a good, old-fashioned site visit where the designer can sketch something out for the tradesman while they are both looking at the same thing, at the same time and under the same weather conditions.

On another note, there was a recent announcement in B.C. that, effective in 2009, those working on provincial highways will have to wear lime-green safety vests instead of the familiar orange ones. If you happen to be doing right-of-way work just off the highway and you are in the bush, the green would be anything but highly visible. And if you are working at an intersection where a provincial highway meets a municipal road—what then? How do you stay legal?

Why the change? Apparently some drivers have successfully argued in court that they cannot differentiate between the orange pylons and the workers wearing orange—both of which should be approached with caution, anyway.

My response to that would be that if you can't tell the difference between a safety marking and a moving person wearing orange, maybe you shouldn't be driving. ♦

Tonia Jurbin, P. Eng. is a geotechnical engineer and regular contributor to WCN. She is based in Greater Vancouver. www.toniajurbin.com. Contact editor@on-sitemag.com.

Rate this article

We want your opinion! And let us know what topics you would find useful in upcoming issues. Please visit www.on-sitemag.com and click on FEEDBACK.

