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Discussion: Competencies for the intelligent public sector construction client

Bernard Aritua PhD
Research Fellow, School of Civil Engineering, University of Leeds, UK
Steve Male MSc, PhD
Visiting Professor of Property and Infrastructure Asset Management, Department of Civil Engineering, RAZAK, School of Engineering and Advanced Technology, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Denise Bower PhD, MASCE
Professor of Engineering Project Management, School of Civil Engineering, University of Leeds, UK
Nancy Madter MSc
Research Fellow and Doctoral Scholar, School of Civil Engineering, University of Leeds, UK
Adrian Coy BSc(Hons), CEng, FICE
Local Authorities Director, URS Infrastructure & Environment UK Limited, UK

Contribution by A. Coy

Aritua *et al*. (2011) highlight an issue that will be exacerbated as more services are outsourced. New procurement models offer excellent value to the taxpayer, but care must be taken to protect the public sector from an erosion of the standard of professional civil engineering advice they have traditionally enjoyed.

The conclusions point to succession planning but the reviewer would suggest that alternative solutions can be nurtured that provide a more sustainable alternative.

Shall we in the future have civil engineers administering contracts of outsourced services, or a new breed of professionals that understand contract administration and governance but lack technical knowledge and experience? Who will provide strategic infrastructure advice to politicians and corporate management teams if those who administer contracts lack the technical knowledge on which their advice should be based? What will be the outcome for the long-term integrity of infrastructure and for securing the investment needed to provide for future generations?

The solution is a more flexible approach to training and professional development that spans the public and private sectors.

Consultants, contractors, local authorities and other public sector client should be able to appoint staff from a pool of engineers who have worked across sectors and have built a breadth and depth of knowledge and experience that will add value in whichever sector they work. Engineers should be encouraged to develop their careers by moving between sectors to accelerate their professional development and to broaden their opportunities. Politicians and corporate management teams will benefit from the strategic advice and professional gravitas that a new generation of engineers with cross-sector experience can provide.

Authors' reply

The research team, both individually and collectively, have addressed the issues associated with the role of the informed/intelligent client in the public and private sectors for well over a decade. In the public sector it came to the fore as an important topic in work conducted for the Office of Government Commerce (OGC) as enabling research dealing with asset management across the central civil government estate (UoL, 2006), and which subsequently laid the foundation for the OGC's High Performing Property initiative. The informed/intelligent client role was further identified as a vital and critical one for the public sector in a subsequent study (UoL, 2008) that provided background research to the paper under discussion. A range of interviews with senior managers in the private and public sectors identified one defining and consistent characteristic of the skill set for an individual involved in the front end of projects. They should have a 360-degree capability that covers strategic, technical, and stakeholder management competencies. Those skills were in short supply in the private and public sectors, and were developed over a sustained period of time through a combination of depth and breadth of experience across a diverse range of infrastructure-related projects.

More importantly for the comments made by the respondent, the members of the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee (HoC, 2009) were shocked to discover engineering advice had been lacking in a number of important policy formulation areas or had not been sought early enough; there was also insufficient engineering expertise for the government to act as an intelligent customer and, finally, there was a need for much better trans-departmental management of engineering policy. Additionally, the whole issue of

an appropriate skill base, and any associated deficiencies, for the public sector client role has been raised yet again in the coalition government's construction strategy (Cabinet Office, 2011). That strategy also indicated that the cabinet office, working with government construction clients, had recently undertaken a survey of existing client capability in government to confirm the extent to which further skills development is needed in the government informed/intelligent client role.

The research team can only but endorse the comments made by the respondent and in conclusion it is clear that there is first a need for engineering skills at policy level in the arena of public infrastructure, and second that the nature and extent of any deficiencies in the public sector client role would still appear to remain unresolved.

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