

4 Challenges of Running a Survey Business

An abstract of a Mentoring Mondays presentation from January 18, 2021

Landon Blake is the President and Senior Land Surveyor at [Redefined Horizons](#). He established his surveying business in February 2020, mere weeks before the current health crisis was branded a global pandemic.

With just under 12 months of business ownership under his belt, Landon joined us for a Mentoring Mondays seminar to share his insights. His goal was to share the significant challenges that he encountered during his first year in business.



Two decades in the survey business.

While Landon is running his own show for the first time, he's been surveying for over 20 years. A stickler for doing things the right way, Landon jokes that he decided to start his own business after getting fired from several jobs for being a rule-follower.

"One of the challenges I've had as a land surveyor is working for larger civil survey firms and just getting a civil side of the house to do things the right way," Landon said. He describes the challenges of convincing civil engineers to file a record survey, among other things.

That desire to do a thing correctly as a surveyor isn't just about being principled – it's also about protecting yourself under the law.

"If you're a licensed professional, it's somewhere in between being an owner and being just a regular professional," Landon explained. "There is a difference when you're a licensed professional, and you're signing and sealing your own work; you carry some responsibility with you."

He gave the example of when he was newly licensed and working for a survey company. Because the California statute of limitations is ten years, he asked his company if he could start keeping a copy of the file for each survey he signed off on. They told him flat out "no."

"I had a dilemma as a licensed professional; what do I do?" Landon asked himself. His solution? He made a copy anyway. The moral of this story, Landon said, was that as a licensed surveyor, you have to live up to the code of the profession, even when there is an unclear hierarchy of authority.

"You become personally responsible for your work. And there's a natural tension therebetween that desire to make as much profit as possible and doing things the right way," Landon said. His insistence on doing things right – not just under budget – was a driving factor to go into business for himself.

Challenge #1: Misinformation in the marketplace.

The first challenge Landon discussed was misinformation in the marketplace. Outside of the survey world, many people in other industries simply don't know what surveyors do.

The specific group that Landon discussed on the Mentoring Mondays seminar was real estate agents. During the early days of his business, Landon targeted them almost exclusively. He did an entire series of marketing campaigns and in-person educational presentations with 200+ agents – and got crickets.

Why? Landon was targeting private residential real estate, which in theory could benefit significantly from land surveying. He was also banking on the fact that real estate agents have a fiduciary duty to ask the right questions for their clients. But ultimately, he realized that agents saw surveyors as an annoying setback at best and a money pit at worst.

"Most real estate agents do not want to talk to a surveyor. Because all I'm going to do is find problems. And if I find problems, what happens to their deal? It goes away. We blow up their deal," Landon said.

He realized that zero real estate agents were interested in surveys, regardless of whether they represented the buyer or seller. Of the buyers and sellers themselves, only the buyers represented a potential client pool.

These days, Landon has abandoned his focus on real estate agents and targets buyers directly. "We're trying to get directly to the buyer either through the Internet or through professional associations," Landon said. "I have to try and get to the person whose money is on the line."

The myth about title insurance.

Another common misconception Landon encounters is the idea that real estate title insurance offers protection to buyers. He hears people parrot this so often that he's dubbed title insurance the most misunderstood product in the commercial real estate industry.

"Buying title insurance and thinking it's going to solve all the real estate problems you might have is like going out into a blizzard in a bikini," said Landon. "Title insurance doesn't cover very much. It doesn't. In fact, you could drive a school bus through the exceptions in your typical title insurance policy."

This should not come as a surprise, as it's not exactly a secret. If you grab a typical commercial policy, it states the many exceptions that would cause coverage to be withheld. For example, the "survey exception" says that title insurance will not cover anything that would be resolved or revealed by a properly executed survey. If you have a survey performed, the title company will remove that language. But most buyers don't commission one.

"These aren't mom and pop buying a home," Landon clarified. "These are people that are buying and selling commercial property, district property, retail property. They don't understand what's covered by their title insurance."

It's clear that an initial survey's cost would be preferable to denied coverage and the resulting lawyer fees. But sadly, buyers don't discover this until it's too late.

Lack of clarity around survey cost.

Another challenge Landon encounters regularly are clients who have no idea what a survey actually costs. Real estate agents often quote clients a ballpark figures that are thousands of dollars too low. This isn't done purposefully; it's just yet another result of misinformation. He has set out to rectify this by talking about survey costs regularly on Landon's [YouTube marketing channel](#),

"I was on the phone with a real estate agent today. He owned some property up in Castro Valley. It hasn't been surveyed since the GLO went through," Landon said. "It's got some Caltrans right away running through it. There are no monuments set. I looked at some records and got some poking around. I figured I got two or three days crawling around the Hills there in the East Bay, trying to find some corners."

He quoted \$20,000 for the job, only have the owners push back in confusion. Ten years ago, they'd had another survey done for only \$3,000. But it turned out that only four corners had been set. The wooden stakes the original surveyor had used were long gone. The owner had never received a copy of the survey. And there was no survey on file with the county. To Landon, it looked like an illegal survey.

"At the end of the conversation, the guy said, you know what, I'm glad I talked to you," Landon said. "He said that I get it. I understand why it's going to cost what it costs."

This illustrates the need for increased client education, but it also points back to the matter of surveyor integrity. When surveyors cut corners – no pun intended – it can have painful consequences for landowners and future surveyors alike.

Challenge #2: Finding your.

At first glance, all surveyors may provide essentially the same service. But in reality, there are clear professional niches within surveying. As a business owner, it's to your advantage to specialize in a niche.

Landon believes that most modern firms are too general. As land surveying becomes more professional due to sophisticated technology and equipment (such as UAV), it can be helpful to hire specialists when you need them rather than try to be an expert at everything yourself.



"Part of the way that you can be successful is by figuring out your niche and try not to take on the whole world, to take on everything," Landon said. "It's just it's going to raise your equipment costs, and you're going to need more people to be trained in more different things." For now, Landon employs three full-time staff members who are all focused on one specific market.

Don't chase work outside your market.

It can be a challenge to remain committed to your niche and your company vision – especially when you want to maximize profits. The result is that you have to walk a fine line between pushing your team to learn and grow and not biting off more than you can chew.

Landon gave the example of a client that reached out to him in December 2020. It was a client that he had a great relationship with. The client needed some work done, and he was willing to pay generously. Landon was tempted to take the project but instead chose to refer the client to another firm, setting for a finder's fee instead of a big payout.

"I don't chase stuff out of my market," said Landon. "I said, hey, I would love that work right now. I could really use it. It's wintertime, and things are a little quiet. But that's not in my wheelhouse. I don't have the right toolset. I said, let me refer you to an excellent surveyor that does that kind of work." He referred the work to his friend's surveying company, where they had the \$300,000 UAV LIDAR set up that was perfect for the canal mapping job.

While Landon and his partner struggled with the decision to turn the project down, they soon felt some peace of mind. "We ended up helping with the project a little bit," Landon said. "After I saw that thing on the ground about that second day, we were out there; I looked at my partner. And I'm like, man, I am so glad we didn't bite this off. Cause we'd have got our butts kicked."

The silver lining was that they maintained an excellent relationship with the client and also got to work alongside an expert firm and learn some new technology. At the end of the day, Landon was confident in his decision to remain faithful to his niche. As a brand new firm, you have to walk before you can run. You have to control your growth intentionally. And no matter how long you've been in business, you don't want to face the ethical dilemma of practicing outside your area of competence.

Challenge #3: Transferring knowledge to junior staff.

Perhaps the biggest key to business success in any industry is passing along expertise. When staff members are adequately trained and empowered to succeed, they can contribute directly to the company's success. They are also often more likely to stay with a company for a long time.

But this is easier said than done. Education is a huge time investment for employers, and while the value of sharing expertise is clear, it often gets pushed to the back burner.



"If I get hit by a bus tomorrow, what happens?" Landon asked. "The answer right now is we're in big trouble. And so I want to not be in that place."

This topic struck a chord with all in attendance on the Mentoring Mondays call. Below is a summary of the collective wisdom they shared.

Encourage self-sufficiency.

We've all had that thought that perhaps the fastest and easiest way to accomplish a task is to do it yourself. That may be true, but it's also shortsighted. In the long term, business owners need to have team members they can rely on to share the burden and do a job well.

This comes by intentionally giving your team the space to be self-sufficient. It can mean giving your number two in command more solo tasks. Or it can mean letting someone new and green accomplish a job, even though it may be painfully time-consuming to watch.

This means working hard to get his number two guy licensed within the next 18 months for Landon. Not only does he want him licensed, but he also wants him confident. "We were out today, and he did a boundary survey, found about 15 corners by himself," Landon said. "And I could not have been there today, and he'd had done all right. I was there cause he's still learning, but I'm always thinking about how I can make that knowledge transfer process more efficient."

Use video as a training tool.

One of the ways Landon has discovered to increase efficiency is by using video as a training tool. It's another method that's very time-consuming to set up on the front end but then saves him an enormous amount of time later.

For example, you can personally sit down with every new team member and give the same talk over and over. Or, you can record the lesson once and then instruct them to watch the video.

"Now, instead of having to stop and teach the same thing again, the second or third or fourth time, I can tell my team member, Hey, go watch this video that I recorded. And then when you come back, let's sit down for 10 minutes and talk about it," Landon said. "I think it allows us to scale the learning without the cost, which I'm excited about."



Landon specifically likes video as opposed to a written, textbook-style learning format. While you still need written guidelines and workflows, videos are more engaging, and many people learn better on a screen.

"I'm trying to get my knowledge out of my brain and onto paper in a manner that my people can follow. And that's a massive effort. That's constantly overwhelming me," Landon said. "There's a lot that I've just assimilated over the last 20 years that I'm trying to put down on paper for folks and put in a video for folks."

Reduce turnover.

Having a strong and supportive company culture is the key to a stable workforce. The surveying community, like many industries, suffers from a high turnover rate. Every time an employee moves on, you need to find and train a replacement. And that process is quite expensive and time-consuming. Because even if a new employee has the technical skillset in place, they aren't yet an expert at your business and your niche.

In order to retain staff, you need to support and empower them. And when you regularly transfer expertise and reward the accumulation of knowledge, you will win their appreciation. Encouraging and inspiring your team members might seem daunting, but it can happen in several small ways that add up.

For example, imagine an employee is offered the chance to work at a new firm. The pay and benefits are roughly the same as their current company. How will they make that choice? If their current firm has mentored and supported

them, they will likely feel no urge to move on to a different firm. But if the new firm is known for its great mentors and culture, and your firm is not – you have a problem.

Connect education with compensation.

Landon is currently running a new experiment in an attempt to motivate and retain his younger team members. His most unique professional development program aims to reward education with compensation directly.

How does it work? It's a point-based system where points earned translate to a higher paycheck. "You earn points for the stuff you learn on the job, and we track it. You're evaluated every month, and we track what new skills you're learning on the job, and those are assigned points. And then we also have points you can earn off the job. So by taking a community college course or getting one of your CSTs. Or you can earn points by watching videos and reading articles," said Landon. "And then what we do is we tie that directly into your compensation."

They set up the program so that a certain percentage of points can be earned on the job, but the rest need to be achieved outside of work. This incentivizes employees to pursue professional growth both on and off the clock.

This system also prevents employees from feeling discouraged when hard work goes unrecognized – because it doesn't. "I don't want a situation where I've got somebody that's been working for me for a couple of years, and I failed to fail to recognize their growth. Because that's a problem," said Landon. "That forces me as an owner is to sit down and say, hey, I hired this guy who was a dipstick three years ago, and I still think he's a dipstick, but the reality is he's not a dipstick anymore. He's at three years of training under my partner and me. And here are the things he knows that he didn't know three years ago. Am I paying them appropriately?"

Landon hopes that over time, the program serves to both increase retention and encourage employees to invest in their own future.

Remember that training scales over time.

The great news is that once you successfully train a few key people properly, the burden of training new employees can be shared. The more diverse your team becomes, the better you can have training relationships between junior and senior staff members.

"I didn't properly anticipate how much of the training I was going to have to do, just because we're a small firm," said Landon. "I look forward to when I've got a couple of people underneath me that can take on some of that, so as you grow, your ability to train scales, right? Because if I train three people now, those three people can each train three people."

When you first start, the training burden can seem difficult to bear. But it's important to remember that every hour you spend training a team member is an investment. Whether they are an 18-year-old new surveyor or a 30-year-old surveyor about to be licensed, the time you spend training is never wasted. It pays dividends down the road.

Challenge #4: Balancing free and paid expertise.

The last challenge that Landon discussed was that of walking the line between free and paid work. While educating the public is undoubtedly part of the responsibility of being a land surveyor, you also don't want to let it put you out of business.

Landon likened it to a land attorney, who at some point has to stop answering questions for free and get a client to sign a contract. "One of the things that I've learned from attorneys is attorneys have to be careful, because, at some point when they're given that advice, they acquire a responsibility to that person, whether they're under contract or not," said Landon. "I'm not exactly a hundred percent sure how those rules apply to surveyors, but it's made me a little more cautious about how much advice I'm willing to give."

So while Landon does take many phone calls at the office, he tries not to spend hours doing work that would typically be paid. Spending two hours on multiple calls a day can quickly eat up your workweek, and clients are quick to devalue your time.

"I had a gal just a month ago that told me she was going to hire me for a survey. I pulled all the maps. I figured out where the corners were. I was answering questions about her zoning. I spent two days with this gal trying to get her prepped and ready to sign a contract," Landon said. "And then she called me the third day and said, hey, I found an old retired engineer that lives two blocks down from me. He's going to do my survey for \$1,500 bucks."

The argument for free expertise.

The Mentoring Monday group seemed polarized on this topic, with some attendees saying that they would educate clients no matter what. Some argued that you leave potential clients with a positive experience when you position yourself as an educator. Even if they don't secure your services personally at that time, they leave thinking of you as an expert and are ready to refer your name or utilize you in the future.

It's clear that there is no one "right" way to straddle the line between free client education and paid client work. For Landon's fledgling company of three employees, time is precious. He has learned through trial and error to act accordingly. And when he does give out a hefty serving of free advice, he requests something like a review for the company website in return.

"That is one way for me to get a little bit of value," said Landon. "If you are helping people and demonstrating some value, it doesn't hurt to ask for a little referral, a little testimonial. A lot of times, people will do that for you."

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