



barrell
TREE CONSULTANCY

Arboriculture: lifestyle or profession?

The AA Newsletter (Spring 2011)

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In this first article of a four-part series on professionalism, Jeremy Barrell explores the prospects for a fulfilling consultancy career in arboriculture. At first glance, one could be forgiven for thinking that the outlook is not good, in fact quite grim, but peel away the superficial distractions and Jeremy believes the future is full of promise. Trees are in the ascendancy and for the arboriculturists who have the skills and experience to deliver their benefits, a new age of respect and recognition is emerging.

Arboricultural career prospects

From many external viewpoints, arboriculture as a profession must look a mess: a bunch of tree enthusiasts struggling to make it in a professional world, with very little hope of succeeding! The evidence is there for all to see: in three of the last five court cases involving tree failures, judges criticised tree experts for not understanding and observing the rules of the court; written reports in the professional arena regularly fail to meet even basic standards of grammar and presentation; a splintered professional leadership seems unable to collectively lobby on matters of importance; and gifted individuals are unable to express themselves within a functioning professional framework. For those trying to map out a career with trees, having to negotiate so many obstacles to attain professional security is a daunting prospect indeed. So, is there a future in

trees, will there ever be professional stability and does arboriculture have any hope of offering a rewarding career that can compete with all the other options?

Climate change is focusing attention on trees and tree managers

In a broader context, we should never forget the appalling damage the banking profession inflicted on each of us individually and collectively as a nation, but the economic pain we are currently experiencing is likely to be nothing more than a short-term distraction compared to the trauma to come. Climate change will dominate future decision-making and the pressure to move our lives onto a sustainable footing will be intense, although seemingly distant right now. The Climate Change Act 2008 legally binds us all to achieving massive reductions in carbon generation, aiming to avert the most extreme predictions

Arboriculture: lifestyle or profession? AA Newsletter (Spring 2011)

through mitigation plans and to reduce the physical impact on our population through adaptation measures. While we still struggle to come to grips with our economic despair, in the background, climate change is relentlessly pushing our fragile lifestyle to the brink of collapse.

Although environmental catastrophe is undoubtedly close, we are not quite at the point of no return yet. Indeed, trees provide a great opportunity to tip the balance back in our favour and, as tree managers, arboriculturists can have an important role in pulling humanity back

from the precipice. Increasing canopy cover where we live and work has tremendous potential to make life more comfortable during the expected weather extremes. Climate adaptation holds a strong and vibrant future for us because tree benefits are numerous, the public has an instinctive affinity towards trees and we have the management expertise to deliver green relief when it will be most needed. No other professionals can do this; that is why arboriculturists matter and why there is a great future for professional arboriculture.



Arboriculture: lifestyle or profession? AA Newsletter (Spring 2011)

Where arboriculture is and where it needs to be

In general terms, the arboricultural industry consists of the people who do the physical work to trees and the supporting administrative infrastructure, i.e. the contractors who plant, prune and fell, and the suppliers who provide the equipment to service that work. It is well established, with a competent workforce and efficient procedures and processes, which is to be expected because it has been developing for the last 30–40 years. By comparison, the arboricultural profession, i.e. the people and infrastructure providing tree advice, is in its infancy, with only 10–20 years of any significant development. Unlike established professions, such as accountancy or surveying, which have tried and tested documentation and protocols, arboriculture is still working out the best way to function, with a rapidly evolving professional practice framework.

More specifically, the majority of the people in the arboricultural profession (part-time consultants, full-time consultants and tree officers) have a predominantly practical background, mostly having moved up from the tree industry. This wealth of practical experience means our people have the knowledge to know what to advise, but a poorly developed professional practice framework is not assisting them with the delivery of that advice at the professional

level. In short, arboriculture has an abundance of practical skills and knowledge, which are essential prerequisites for providing competent management. However, the mechanisms for delivering that advice in a professional manner are lacking, which is why I opened with the rather disappointing list in the first paragraph. Clearly, there is still some way to go on matters of ethical standards, reporting and expert practice before arboriculture can be considered an effectively functioning profession.

In all fairness, establishing and administering the overall professional practice framework is very much down to organisations, whose capacity to serve will be limited by membership numbers. Compared to larger professions such as surveying, whose professional body, RICS (the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors), has over 20,000 members worldwide, arboriculture cannot even begin to offer a comparable professional support service. However, there is no reason why individuals within any profession cannot practise at a similar level; indeed, it is a professional responsibility to do so. Arboriculture is no exception and size cannot be a sustainable excuse for poor professional practice. High standards of ethics and working practice are essential; there are plenty of other professional institutions to use as benchmarks and all arboriculturists hoping to practise as professionals must step up to meet these basic requirements.

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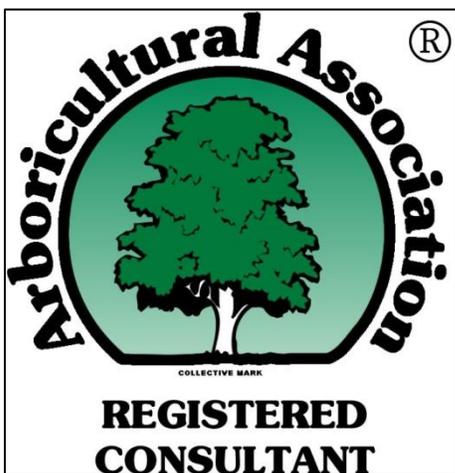
Badges of professional competence

Whether you are doing contracting work and thinking about consultancy, a tree officer facing redundancy or just wanting to move on, an existing consultant with hopes of moving up the ladder or a migrant from another discipline considering a career in trees, the questions are always the same. Can this be a fulfilling career, do you have the skills to succeed, what do you need to do, how do you find help and how do you progress as quickly as possible? If you have professional ambitions and are not sure what to do next, there are three main routes to enhance your credentials (see 'Badges of competence' panel). Each is time consuming and requires a high level of professional experience, but all have their own unique set of benefits when completed.



In the most recent two-day consultancy workshop, 18 of the 19 delegates rated the lead presenters and the supporting documentation as either good or very good, suggesting that this is a useful pre-requisite to a formal application.

Arboriculture: lifestyle or profession? AA Newsletter (Spring 2011)



Arboricultural Association (AA) Registered Consultant: The AA Registered Consultant scheme is a rigorous test of an individual's consultancy skills and achievements against a very high standard. Candidates have to submit a variety of formal reports covering a full range of consultancy matters, from development site management through to working as an expert witness. If these meet satisfactory standards of presentation and content, the candidate is asked to interview. This lasts about two hours and is intended to test the candidate's ethical competence as well as the obvious requirements

to write and communicate at the highest professional level. It is an extremely tough and challenging process, and is certainly not for the faint-hearted, but is the ultimate achievement for any aspiring consultant. In support of prospective candidates, the AA runs a two-day consultancy workshop on the essentials of report writing, business management and professional practice (www.trees.org.uk/training-events/Training).



The Institute of Chartered Foresters (ICF) route to chartered status: Chartered status has the benefit of being internationally recognised across all professions as a standard measure of professional achievement. The ICF (www.charteredforesters.org) administers the process and has made significant progress in the

last decade to improve the accessibility for arboriculturists. Entry is at Associate level where a member undertakes a two-year period of recorded work, followed by a written submission and interview. Associates are expected to become chartered within 15 years. Senior practitioners who can demonstrate their seniority can also apply directly. If successful, their experience and understanding of professional practice are explored at interview. Successful applicants can choose between the Chartered Forester or Chartered Arboriculturist designation, each conferring the same status. During the last five years there has been a steady flow of arboriculturists into the ICF, with 11 new arboricultural members making the grade in 2010. Once chartered, a member is known as a Professional Member (MICFor), with the option to apply to progress up to Fellow (FICFor) after 5 years of membership (with at least 10 years of professional experience), making it a comprehensive and important consultancy achievement. A significant benefit of being chartered through ICF is that

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it provides an opportunity to join RICS (www.rics.org) at the equivalent grade through the Senior Professional Route, gaining access to its extensive professional support infrastructure.



The American Society of Consulting Arborist (ASCA) Registered Consulting Arborist (RCA): Although this is an American organisation, the ethics and principles of professional practice are similar around the world, making the RCA designation of relevance to arborists in the UK. To

begin the process, it is compulsory to attend an ASCA Academy (www.asca-consultants.org), run annually in February at a different US location each time. During four days of intense interactive training, there is a focus on report-writing skills and ethics, culminating in a 2.5-hour, 100-question, multiple-choice exam, where delegates have to achieve a 70% pass mark to successfully graduate. This gains entry to the next phase, which is a succession of writing assignments, where candidates are sent a consultancy scenario and have to write their own report. This is independently marked against a published set of criteria, with a pass mark of 75%. Two passed assignments later and the candidate moves on to the final phase, which is the submission of one of their own reports for the same marking process. Passing all the stages gains access to the US consulting elite, which is no mean feat in terms of time, effort and money, especially if you are UK-based!

The AA Registered Consultant is the toughest route in every aspect and only the best progress, so prospective candidates need to brace themselves for a rough ride. The ICF route is similar, with demanding written submissions and a probing interview, plus the bonus of international and cross-profession recognition. The ASCA process is different; there is a strong focus on ethics at the Academy and then on writing to a prescribed template for the report submissions. It is not formally recognised in the UK, but it is equally demanding and stands at the same level as the ICF and AA options. If full-time consultancy is your aspiration, then any one of these is a great start, two begins to set you apart and all three is about as good as it gets.



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Future articles

Professionalism: Applying high ethical standards in a competitive commercial world is challenging, but essential if you are to meet the demands of a professional career. Jeremy explores these complex issues, with a host of practical tips on what you can do to get the balance right.

Extreme consulting: is being an expert witness for you? Acting as an expert witness is the pinnacle of professional practice. Find out if you have what it takes to get to the top or whether you may be happier to avoid it altogether!

The standard of the duty of care relating to trees: When a tree failure results in harm, the courts will be focused on the duty of care and whether it was met by the duty holder. Jeremy will discuss how much management is enough in the context of recent court cases and emerging best practice for tree inspections.