

# CLEAR COMMUNICATION IN AN ERA OF CONSULTANTS & CONTRACTORS

By Pieta Woolley



It's happened to Wahkash Contracting's Dorian Uzzell many, many times.

At one of his company's stump-to-dump operations on Vancouver Island, staff will find a goshawk nest that wasn't on the planner's documents. Or a shell midden. Or they'll find that the yarding deflections are inadequate. Or another office-to-forest gap.

Sometimes, everything must stop immediately for safety, nature and culture—and wait for the licensee and government to sort it out. That's expensive and rare. More often, the communications gap just costs his crews efficiency.

"It's not the fault of individuals," says Dorian Uzzell from his office in Campbell River, noting that the engineers and

foresters are very thorough. "It's more the fault of improper information about volume per hectare in a stand, or how slow or fast the road construction will take."

For the 42-year-old, it's always been like this; Uzzell started logging in 1993, the era of much-enhanced safety and environmental regulations. He doesn't resent it; he's proud to work in the sustainable, values-driven industry he's been trained for.

Still, poor communication in the woods creates a ripple effect that makes Wahkash Contracting less productive, and less profitable.

"Back 30 years ago, the planners and supervisors would all eat dinner together in the same cookhouse in a remote





logging camp and talk about how the day went,” says Uzzell, harkening back to his father’s and grandfather’s days harvesting timber. “At the next table over, there would be the grapple yarders and the crews. They’d discuss why the wood was laid out that way. And if there had been a problem somewhere along the line, the engineers could drive right up and look at it.”

Now, instead of a dinner table, there’s an iPhone. Uzzell spends about 60 hours a week communicating via email, text and phone with Waghkash’s four supervisors, plus his clients’ contract supervisors and managers. “My wife would probably tell you it’s 90 hours,” he says dryly.

But messaging—no matter how advanced—is not enough. Direct engagement between contractors, licensees and consultants, he says, would help get planning right the first time and make his business much more efficient.

The need for better communication is a sentiment that is repeated by many loggers, and engineering and planning consultants in BC. They point to an over-reliance on technology and too little face-to-face time as the cause of a disconnect that results in inefficient lurch harvesting and ultimately, reduces contractors’ ability to be profitable.

But in today’s world of tight margins, face-to-face time costs money that no one has. Who will pay for it?

Jonathan Lok does—but not as often as he’d like. The managing partner of business development with Port McNeill’s Strategic Natural Resource Consultants really understands the value of investing in communication.

“Hiking the same ground and sweating together—that’s where effective conversation happens,” he says. “If you’re around a table, it can get conceptual and confrontational. The number of issues that can get resolved out in the bush—the success rate is 100 per cent.”

So, he takes his teams out into the bush to meet with contractors and licensees as often as he can. Getting a crew of 4 or 5 out to the woods starts at \$2500 a day and goes up from there,



depending on transportation costs. Too often, he says, everyone relies on phones, photographs, and interactive spatially-adjusted maps when nothing but a team meeting will do.

"If we can get it right, everyone's job is safer and better. I wish more were invested in the planning phase."

From his office in Prince George, consultant Barry Mills echoes Lok's concerns.

## Back 30 years go, the planners and supervisors would all eat dinner together in the same cookhouse in a remote logging camp and talk about how the day went.

"Every day we meet in the forest, my team comes back enlightened. We're all on the same page and we're learning together and aligned and now we can perform."

Lok points out that planning is the cheapest phase of executing a forestry operation—with the biggest impact downstream. Over the past 15 years, he explained, licensees have become leaner, contracting out much of their expertise and operations. Because the members of a team may never see each other, communicating becomes vital. Learning from each other used to be an entrenched part of forestry; now, the parts of a team may never meet.

The vice president of operations for Industrial Forest Systems Ltd. remembers laying out a block that included both a ground-based area and a cable area. In a meeting, the cable logger pointed out that the location of the split line would interfere with his setup to log the steep ground. Fortunately, this meeting happened early in the planning stages, so Mills' team was able to simply shift a road location, and the operation became safe again.

Usually, he noted, it's not that simple—because problems are identified after the plans have been made and approved, not before.

"Say the logger looks over a block and the wildlife tree patch is just in the wrong place and will cause a safety concern. He may only want to move the ribbon by a few metres, but it becomes an administrative nightmare because of policy," Mills says.

Adding to the pressure on getting communications right are two emerging trends, Mills says. First, the vast number of workers retiring out of the woods right now means many contractors and planners are relative newbies—they don't have the depth of experience their seniors do, yet. Second, the contract terms have shrunk, and companies bounce between clients. Working relationships, in other words, suffer from lack of familiarity.

However, the thorniest issue making communication so crucial today, Mills noted, is money. He explained that consultants, licensees and harvesters all operate in today's values-driven system with multiple regulations protecting old growth, migratory birds, archaeological sites, riparian areas, caribou and more—but with yesterday's dollars. "Both the contractor and the consultants need



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more pay” to reflect our industry’s commitment to protecting ecosystems and culturally significant areas, he says.

That investment will pay for itself quickly, according to Adam Wunderlich, RPE, and co-owner of KDL Group in Fort St. James. He figures that for every extra dollar spent in the planning phase, three are saved further down the line—usually by the harvester.

“Our current industry model has very little communication between the actual engineers and the loggers,” he says. “Rarely do loggers have the opportunity to review the engineering before the plans are approved. And rarely is there a post-harvest review of a block to discuss what went well and what didn’t. I suspect that engineers are rarely given feedback on the operability of their plans.”

However, he admits, because improving communication mostly impacts contractors rather than governments or licensees, making changes may be difficult. Convincing those with the purse-strings that investing in communications upstream is an urgent need may take some work.

“Rarely is there a major issue that requires stopping work,” he says. “Generally speaking, [poor communication] is causing frequent minor issues, such as higher than usual logging costs, poor decking or non-optimal road placement—things that affect us and drive up our costs.”

Ultimately, Wunderlich says, everyone benefits economically when planning gets proper investment. With a reliable plan, the contractor can become more efficient, and some of that savings gets passed back up to the licensee, when the contractor bids on jobs. In other words, better planning isn’t a lost cost for governments and licensees. Rather, it’s a strategic investment in a lower delivered log costs.▲

Uzzell is proud of BC’s sustainable, values-driven industry but he knows better office-to-forest communication would reduce the number of slowdowns caused by things like an unexpected goshawk nest.

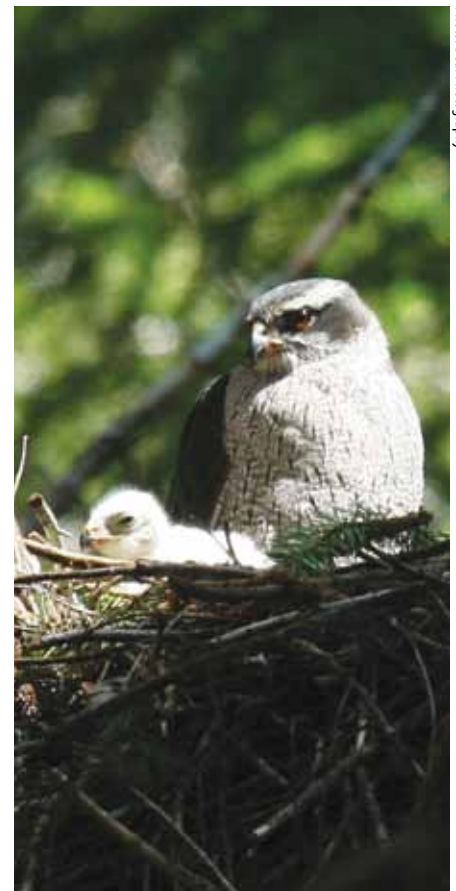


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