Arboriculture: professionals in search of a profession

After four decades in arboriculture, Jez Lawton considers the challenges for those seeking professionalism in an industry which is only in its infancy

Jeremy Lawton MICFor MArborA

Through a combination of luck and judgement, I have sustained a long career in arboriculture. It has given me the opportunity to make a small contribution to trees and to people who enjoy their benefits.

Along the way I have travelled, worked on varied projects with excellent colleagues and formed lasting friendships. Vocationally, that is all good news. Economically and practically, though, the reality of trying to progress as a 'professional' can be far more challenging

Challenges

To be blunt, the main challenge is that there is no coherent professional framework to operate within. Throughout my 40 years, there have been improvements, of course, but overall, it was and remains a 'free for all'.

This lack of framework is the result of several factors, the key ones being:

- Arboriculture is a small industry, lacking clear demarcation
- Opinion driven, lacking critical review
- Lack of leadership and direction
- Minimal (no?) restrictions to operation/practice
- Self-proclaimed experts[1]
- Reasonable expectations placed on 'professionals'
- Threats from other disciplines, e.g. ecology

As a young and comparatively small industry arboriculture faces unique challenges. In fact, it is difficult to demarcate what constitutes 'the industry',[2] let alone any professional parameters. Is it those that are members of industry organisations? Hold a bona fide arboricultural qualification? Chartership? The likelihood is that what we consider to be the 'arboricultural industry' is a small fraction of those involved in tree work and/or management. On this basis, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that industry bodies[3] also represent and impact on equally small numbers.

It is important to consider that only one of the industry bodies can award chartered status to its members. This is not to denigrate other offerings, but if you are realistically looking to set out your professional stall, chartership is a key benchmark, e.g. RICS, CIEEM etc.[4]

Whilst industry bodies do, of course, make significant contributions, there remains a general lack of clear leadership and direction, particularly in protecting the best interests of their members. This is compounded by the fact that there are no substantive restrictions to practice placed on members. Consequently, progression through membership grades (e.g. member, associate, chartered etc.) does not confer all the benefits gained in other professions. In arboriculture, those holding professional designations and/or striving for professionalism are still likely to be competing with those who have not made the same, or indeed any, levels of commitment both professionally and financially.

It is a positive that we now have arboricultural degrees and in time this may be the pathway to clearly defined professional levels. However, the current challenge is managing the expectations of graduates (who quite reasonably have expectations of reaping benefits for the time and effort expended) when they are faced with real-world arboricultural realities. In most cases they are joining and adding to an already saturated market and paid a pittance for the privilege.

Because arboriculture is by nature inherently opinion driven, strong leadership is required to ensure that members are all singing from the same hymn sheet and operating within technical parameters, achieved through consensus. Unfortunately, the reality is that arboriculture is awash with self-proclaimed experts and opinions driven by those who are flavour of the month and shout the loudest. In these circumstances the cart starts to drive the horse, and change occurs through publicity and loud voices as opposed to robust critical review and informed peer/member consensus.

The fact is, you can refer to yourself as an 'arboricultural consultant' with no experience or qualification. There is a raft of non-regulated[5] or not robustly peer-reviewed proprietary courses open to all. It is possible to equip yourself with a range of diagnostic equipment and proprietary software and start making decisions with significant implications for high-value trees. To compound the situation there is no common consensus on approaches to calculate tree safety thresholds (residual wall strength, overall tree stability etc.); in most situations the method(s) used appears to be a matter of individual faith. The general concern here is the need for a person considering themselves to be a professional to apply critical thinking, understand that these are not matters of fact or industry-approved standards and reflect this in the information we provide to each other, the public and those procuring our services.

I am not suggesting that professionals should or will aways interpret site- and tree-specific circumstances in the same way or reach the same conclusions. However, it seems to me that the range of variance in so many aspects of our work (tree stability, risk assessment, biology/mycology interaction, biomechanics etc.) is such that it is difficult to contemplate that individuals at each end of the spectrum could be members of the same professional body. It's not even possible to read a range of reports where members of industry bodies refer to component parts of trees using standard terms.

The recent consultation on proposed revisions to BS 5837:12 gave an insight into our situation.[6] We cannot define a 'Suitably Qualified' arboriculturist with a sufficiently robust definition to prevent anyone who believes they can have a go, having a go. I hasten to add this is not a criticism of the document; it (and the consultation feedback) merely illustrates that we have no clear identity and therefore cannot even take ownership of what should be a key cornerstone of our profession. In the meantime, ecologists to their credit have continued to raise the bar both professionally and academically and we should learn from their example before arboriculture becomes a subset of ecology.

Many of my previous comments would apply equality to the practical side of things. Get a

chainsaw, rope and harness and you are an arboriculturist. The makers of a radio drama centring on the lives of everyday country folk should be applauded for demonstrating what we are facing. A caterer and agricultural worker on Monday; a brief period of training (and assessment) and the following week an arboricultural contractor. Free to work at height in complicated structures with a chainsaw, inadequate rescue provision and hacking away at high-value trees. This recent story line reminded me of drivers that led me to cease contracting 25 years ago (I was an Arboricultural Association Approved Contractor) and more recently stop working as a trainer, assessor and a witness for the Health and Safety Executive.

My point is that our societal value and our professional and economic progress (particularly for contractors) remain intrinsically caught up in the wake of those operating outside industry organisations. When I was working as a trainer and assessor, there was, and remains, a lack of appetite to raise the bar on a low-level chainsaw and aerial qualification structure. I was just facilitating flooding the market with the low skilled, with significant implications for standards of tree care and worker safety, whilst perpetuating a low-wage culture. It also seemed to me that this situation was a catalyst to many accidents.

In summary

If you are striving for excellence, I urge you to seek professional membership status as a starting point if you have not already done so. Whilst there are many benefits, perhaps the most important is playing a part in shaping our industry into a true profession. However, just seeding an industry with professionals and hoping for osmotic change is not in itself sufficient.

Unlike other long-established professional organisations with a niche market share advantage, we must work doubly hard to establish our professional identity because so many people working in trees and arboriculture operate outside of our industry bodies. Consequently, I urge those that represent us and our industry bodies to raise the bar at every level and opportunity. We need to put clear distance between those who are committed to excellence and professionalism and those who are not. We should be taking ownership of framework documents to ensure they are the preserve of our profession not just for anybody who wants to have a go.

Put simply, to operate as a professional there must be a professional framework to operate within. Arboriculture is at best a profession in its infancy, and we need to do more collectively and individually or risk a continuing professional and economic race to the bottom.



Jeremy Lawton

Notes

1. For this article, this means opining on subject matter (e.g. maths, statistics, probability) with no obvious proof or evidence of qualification to do so.

2. Horticulture Sector Skills Survey – Sub-Sector Report: Arboriculture (2019). A report for the Ornamental Horticulture Roundtable Group. Available at: www.bit.ly/4pwvDBO.

3. Including the Arboricultural Association, Institute of Chartered Foresters etc.

4. Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management.

5. For this article, to imply they are a product of the training provider with no formal quality control and/or independent scrutiny from a recognised external source.

6. *Trees in relation to design, demolition and construction – Recommendations.*

