

Podcast: How has COVID-19 changed quantity surveying?

Andrew Belt: COVID-19 has changed the world we live in but one of the few positives to have come out of the pandemic is the way we have adapted to this new reality. How we work and interact with one another has changed, and industries have had to adapt too.

In the second episode of this new series of podcasts, we will be looking at how COVID-19 has changed quantity surveying. Joining me to provide an insight is Lewis Eagle, an associate director at chartered quantity surveying practice, Northern Surveying Services.

Hi Lewis.

Lewis Eagle: Hi Andrew. How are you?

AB: Yes, I'm well, thanks. How are you?

LE: Yes, I'm doing very well, thank you. Working from home today, which is the same as every day, but it's definitely exciting to join you.

AB: Great, that's very much on topic, as we will discuss the new reality of what the past year has brought since the outbreak of the pandemic. I just wanted to check: I said Northern Surveying Services, is that the right pronunciation?

LE: It is, yes.

AB: Great. So just the same as northern. I'm glad I got that right.

So, I'll start off the podcast with the most obvious question. How has quantity surveying changed in the post-COVID world?

LE: I'll start by saying that the construction industry as a whole is actually so collaborative. What we've been faced with is a situation where we have to find other ways of being collaborative without face-to-face interaction. As you know, I'm mainly doing this via Zoom and [Microsoft] Teams. In fact, most people are doing it from their homes, which has brought further difficulties. Not being able to get around a table with a bunch of people and a set of drawings to review is harder but with quantity surveying more specifically, I'd say 70% of the work that we're doing is actually computer-based, with the remaining 30% constituting site visits and meetings.

That's where the challenges have been, and it ultimately depends on what type of quantity surveyor you are.

You might be a contractor-based quantity surveyor who would normally be on-site most days or, like myself, 70% computer-based and 30% on-site. The on-site element is where we have faced challenges, such as how can we provide the comfort and clarification to our clients without being there in person. So, we've been faced with finding other means of trying to provide that comfort, checking against contractor performance and valuing works and trying to rely more on others.

AB: You mentioned that 30%, [of your work] is going out on-site and being away from your computer screen. So how have you made up for that since March last year?

LE: I'd say there has been a shift. I would say the 70/30% split was typical pre-COVID, but in the last year we've had to adapt to speaking to others and trying to provide that comfort to

the client. For example, if we were doing a valuation on-site in the first lockdown, we were told not to go to site. So how do we value those works without going?

We might be relying on others such as a clerk of works, who will be on-site more frequently, and discussing with them to get some understanding of what's going on in order to value the works.

I just want to add to that question as well that we're not in the office. When you're in the office, it's so easy to ask questions and overhear other conversations where you pick up nuggets of information that is useful to your day-to-day job. At the moment we don't have that. So, trying to pick up that information can be quite difficult and it's forced me to try and get that information that you wouldn't normally get.

AB: I think that is a very universal kind of takeaway from what's happened in terms of us not being in offices, for those who are used to working in offices and then having to work from home. The atmosphere in the office is where information is disseminated quite naturally. You have to perhaps work a bit harder.

I think the two Cs of collaboration and communication across the construction industry are part of your answers to those first two questions. How equipped do you feel quantity surveying was to adapt during the pandemic?

LE: That's an interesting question. As I say, a large portion of our role is remote, so we can still do that from home and here at Northen Surveying, what we've actually done is ensure that all of the employees have a set-up at home where they can be efficient in their working and they've got their software requirements installed onto the computers as they would in the office.

Trying to ensure that everyone is able to get everything they need and access it easily with no disruption was very key. But, at the same time, we've had to adapt to gain information by other means, and I've spoken about relying on a clerk of works. And as I say, going onto site wasn't an option for some time over the last year.

Other means that we've looked at include on-site cameras. This infrastructure has always been there, but we're now in a position where we really have to use them and take advantage of them.

For example, I was on a project where we were erecting a concrete frame, and I relied heavily on the cameras to check the works and their value, and feed that information back to the client. However, when that project got to a point where the cladding was going on and all the works were internal, I couldn't do that anymore, so I did, in fact, have to go to the site as there was no other way I could do it. It was purely an in-person requirement.

Another thing we've done at Northen is consider the use of drones, which are being more widely used across the construction industry. At this stage, it's more for recording the progress of jobs and the visual aspects and provides external stakeholders information but I really think there's an opportunity for us.

It may be one for the future, or even now, if it was required to use footage or use drones to fly through sites to give us accurate current data that we need to feed into our work. It's something to look at, although we haven't got a requirement for it right now, we're very keen to explore that if it's required.

Summarising all of that, something you can't account for is the flexibility that we sometimes need just to be able to pop down to a site if we feel like we need to check something, or if we

get called to site. It's not as easy because, with contractors' teams working from home as well, they might not be there to accommodate you, show you what you need, or answer your questions, so that's difficult. We usually have to book in advance and then, by that time, we might have the answer to your question, but in a less efficient way.

AB: So, technology clearly was key. I suppose if you weren't relying on certain modes of technology, you perhaps would have found it more difficult, but it sounds like at Northern Surveying Services, you were able to continue to a decent extent of what you were doing before you had to work from home and it has offered an opportunity to look into drones and how you can utilise them.

I'll go back to the 70/30, which you've described as your current situation. Before lockdown, what would you say was the ratio of being out on site, out of the office and working on a computer?

LE: The 70% was probably based pre-COVID and on a normal day, 70% off-site, 30% on-site. At the moment, it's probably closer to 80-90% working remotely. I do see a shift back to the 70% in six months, because you can't be going on-site, seeing the works for yourself and having that sort of understanding to go and feed information back to a client.

And when I say feeding information back to a client, it's not just comments. We're appointed to value the works and advise the client how much they should essentially pay the contractor month by month.

That could be hundreds of thousands of pounds – even higher into the millions on a monthly basis, depending on the size of the project. Clients also have to satisfy stakeholders such as funders and various other end-users so we are really at the knife edge of providing this information. There's no better way than seeing it in person.

AB: I think that that's one of the appeals about working within quantity surveying, at least pre-COVID anyway, that you're not always at your desk.

So, say I'm beginning my journey and want to move into the profession. What kind of a working life could you expect if you were entering as a trainee surveyor?

LE: Starting out, there's going to be heavy involvement in training and development. It's looking like we have a roadmap for getting to the end of COVID. Maybe in six months we can get back to some normality.

At Northern Surveying Services, we like to train our apprentices face-to-face: taking them to sites or sitting next to them and running through work. Having that one-to-one training has so much value to it and that's what we try to achieve, but trying to do that remotely, while we're ticking the boxes, I think there's more value when doing it face-to-face.

I think over the next couple of months, we're starting to open up the office again so we can get back to that and have a relationship with each other where we can train and develop and continue that learning. In the future, I think we will have the office but I think we'll still encourage working from home.

At this stage, I think we're suggesting working from home every Wednesday just to keep that balance. Some people love working from home. There are benefits to being at home one day a week. For example, you can be home when your deliveries arrive. There's that convenience side to it as well.

AB: That leads nicely into the next question, which is how do you think COVID will change both quantity surveying and the built environment as a sector in the long term?

LE: That's interesting. I suspect different people have different views on this, but I think that you will still see people working remotely.

One of the big issues in construction I've experienced before is the amount of travelling required to get some sites. If you have 10 different people who come in from different areas for one site visit, it might not be feasible for everyone so I think you'll still see remote working and people dialing into meetings from home, whereas before they may have normally been being on-site.

It's that more convenient side to it. The offices might turn into more collaborative spaces. I know a few architect practices have been changing that, encouraging their people to still work from home, but use their offices to invite clients and developers and other members of teams to come in and collaborate.

You can also have your breakout working space and other areas of the office and still achieve everything you need to. I also think that learning from the software that we've used over the last year, that there could be more accuracy coming from it, and more innovative ways to try and achieve the job that we're trying to do.

I saw something the other day where someone was walking around a site with a camera and they produced a full 3D model of the site in its current form, and that could link back to many different things that you input on, let's say, so it could essentially value elements of the work remotely.

I think that there will be a mix of everything. There is going to be more technology available, more working from home when it's convenient, but I think trying to maintain that collaborative aspect of being on-site, being in an office, seeing people and working through problems or working through ideas will still be very key.

AB: Great. I think you highlighted three things. There's the workplace and how it'll probably be a blend of working at home and going out on-site, perhaps more flexibility than before, and almost touching upon sustainability where you were saying that fewer people would have to travel as far to do their jobs, based on how we've been working in the last year. So, there's an opportunity perhaps to curb the carbon footprint.

LE: There's an interesting point there actually, because I was on another call the other day with some designers.

During the winter months, I understand there was a study done with an example of a traditional home with a gas boiler and it was actually more sustainable to drive your car to the office than it was to heat your home for the day.

So there are interesting facts around the idea [of sustainability] and it might lead to a push for more sustainable options for people who are still in the house, if working from home is becoming the future.

AB: Oh, wow, very interesting. It's good that there is research being carried out on this because it's probably quite a basic view of mine to hear that you wouldn't be driving in and think, that's great, in terms of using petrol. But then of course, like you say, what do you substitute it with? That's the important thing, if you're spending more energy on warming your house. So that's told me! I think any studies on that would be really interesting and certainly, that's one which maybe is debatable.

Then the third aspect, which was the innovation, and what you've touched upon there with a few examples: 3D modeling, drones, etc., which could be used. So, the technology and the

opportunities there perhaps might have been accelerated. In the past year we've had some really interesting things to consider, and personally, how has it affected the way you worked? How have you found it? I understand you've joined Northern Surveying Services recently as well, so you've also been through a job change in this very strange world we live in now. How have you found it?

LE: Firstly, we used to work in a vibrant office and a year ago, when we were told to work from home, I struggled. My girlfriend's a teacher, so she's still continuing to work in a school.

So, most people are in a position where they're working at home on their own, and it can be difficult and to try and keep yourself engaged and still be efficient with your work. At first, I did struggle but I've had to adapt and work around that.

One of the realisations I came to was the fact that you should make sure you leave the house and go for a short walk or a short break during the day and this actually made me more productive in the afternoon. And I found it actually benefited me more so than anything else I tried. It's also important to leave the house in the evening.

So that's really benefited me, and now I'm looking forward to figuring it out again when we start going back to the office and having a bit of a hybrid model. How is it going to look like? And that leads onto the second part of your question, which was around applying and joining a new company during lockdown.

It was different and I'm quite grateful to have experienced that. I didn't meet my new employers until after the first stage of the interview which again was a different experience. You get a very different understanding when you talk over [Microsoft] Teams than you do face-to-face.

I was quite fortunate to be able to have distanced meet-ups halfway through the interview process. Since joining, we've had to rely heavily on technology and it's really being tested. In my experience, I haven't come across a situation where it's letting me down, which is quite refreshing.

AB: I'm glad to hear it. And then just finally, why do you think someone should be considering a career in quantity surveying?

LE: Yeah, that's a good question. What I was always told when I started going down the route of quantity surveying and the construction industry was that [through quantity surveying] you're involved at pretty much every stage of the construction process and the learning you get throughout these processes at different stages can open up so many doors in the future.

If you find after your qualification, that you go down a route which isn't for you, you can transfer into more of a cost management role or an employer's agent role or a project manager. Or even, you might find that you like a certain element of quantity surveying, which could be more specifically around M&E measurements and pricing or lifecycle costing or bank monitoring. There are so many fields that you can specialise in that you can, to a certain extent, pick and choose which area you want to go into.

Starting off as a quantity surveyor, in my opinion, is probably one of the best options starting a career in the construction industry, unless, of course, you go down the design route, but to get a sense of the development and advisory and project delivery side, it is a good option.

AB: So, you get good variety if you go into quantity surveying and a good overall picture of construction.

LE: Yes, definitely.

AB: Great. So there you go. Thanks for your time, Lewis, and if you are interested in starting or boosting your career in quantity surveying, why not take a look at UCEM's QS programmes by heading to our website - ucem.ac.uk and looking at the undergraduate page for more information about our BSc programme and heading to the postgraduate page for more information about our MSc Quantity Surveying programme.

It's been great getting your insight, Lewis and thanks you for listening.