

The changing role of a construction manager – podcast with UCEM BSc (Hons) Construction Management Programme Leader, Dr Graeme Larsen

Andrew Belt: What is construction management? What lies ahead for the profession and how can UCEM's BSc (Hons) Construction Management programme help you with your built environment journey?

I'm UCEM's PR and Social Media Manager, Andrew Belt, and here to answer these questions, plus a few more, is UCEM BSc (Hons) Construction Management programme leader, Dr Graeme Larsen. How are you?

Dr Graeme Larsen: Hi, Andrew. I'm very well, thanks. How are you?

AB: Not too bad, thank you. A nice Wednesday morning and good to be getting into a meaty subject. So, first off, what is construction management and what traditionally has been the role of a construction manager on a building project?

GL: It's an interesting question, Andrew. I think the role of the construction manager was traditionally embedded in the crafts, in the Master Masons, etc., but, over recent years, it's become very much a professionalised role. And we now have chartered construction managers, which is what our course is accredited to.

Fundamentally, the construction manager is involved in the production process in how to be able to put the various parts of the building together but, central to that, is them being involved in the design as well. Often people think that's just architects but it's not. The construction managers play a key role in the design and they also play a key role in the facilities management, the operation, the maintenance as well, because the decisions that are made during the construction process lead on throughout the entire life of the building.

So, to answer the question, it's really become much more of a holistic role and it's a very exciting profession.

AB: And you mentioned the production and design involved in a construction project. So, what other roles and professionals do you work with as a construction manager?

GL: Again, that's a really good question because the construction sector is the epitome of teamwork. We have buyers, we have quantity surveyors, we have people who are programmers, project managers, digital teams, modelers, virtual reality experts, architects, structural engineers, civil engineers, planners.

Effectively, a building forms part of society and, as such, there are an enormous amount of stakeholders when a building is built. We tend to deal with the public a lot. We tend to deal with various interested parties with interests in particular aspects of the building so it's a really exciting space [to be working in].

AB: You mention the stakeholders there. So, would one of the skills of a construction manager be people management and being a good reader of other people as well.

GL: Definitely. I think you've really caught onto it there because the way the academic literature now describes construction management is that it sees it as a sociotechnical discipline, okay.

So, what we mean by that is that the human behavioral managerial skills are equally as important as the technical knowhow of how to put the building together. And those two things

influence one another. You can't have one without the other if you're going to be a successful construction manager. You need both.

AB: And rolling back to the previous question and your answer there, you mentioned technology. So what role is, and will, technology play in shaping construction management?

GL: The construction sector's in a very exciting time at the moment. There's a phrase within the sector called 'Industry 4.0', which refers to the digitisation of the construction sector.

There has never been more emphasis, more energy and more resources put into trying to digitise the construction sector, from the design and the production process for offsite elements of the building to the digital tools we can use to envisage what the building looks like right the way through to the types of equipment we use to actually put the structure together; so, exoskeletons being worn by operatives, which are a wearable robotic, to drone use. There are an awful lot of things happening at the moment. It's a really exciting time.

AB: And you run UCEM's BSc (Hons) Construction Management programme. How is the changing role of the profession reflected in the programme?

GL: Well, we are very lucky here at UCEM because we have a suite of tutors with a wealth of practical experience – many still working in practice as well as working with us – so we're able to have our finger on the pulse. We're able to know exactly what's happening in the sector.

That is coupled with our expertise around the current body of knowledge around research and around us setting the agenda, so the modules on the programme are constantly reviewed and constantly updated.

We draw on an awful lot on case study material, using example projects of how certain elements are constructed and some of the current challenges. So it's right up to date.

AB: And who would benefit from studying on the programme? You were mentioning before that there's the technical side so being technically minded would be useful, but also being a people person is important, so presumably a mixture of the two would be helpful?

And what disciplines would you be coming from? Would it be school or wider than that?

GL: I think the programme can suit a wide spectrum of people. It can suit people coming with perhaps A levels or a BTech [bachelor of technology], if they're more practically based.

And the modules that we have are balanced, whereby, as you say, there's more the kind of management socio-side and then there's the more technical side. So there's something for everyone and students that come and work with us can play to their strengths and we can support them in the areas where they feel less confident.

And it's the same for people that are coming from industry. Perhaps they've changed industries, perhaps they're seeking a career change, perhaps they're a bit more mature. We're able to support those groups of people on the programme which is fantastic.

AB: And why should people study on the programme?

GL: I think the construction sector generally is a fantastically interesting, varied and challenging place to work and the construction manager has a fantastically central role to play in that.

There is great pride in seeing the building you've constructed finished after perhaps a two- or three-year project and you forget about all the troubles and the challenges, and you see this

building. It's very, very satisfying. Here at UCEM, we are able to provide people with the skills needed to achieve that and that is a fantastic thing.

AB: Thank you, Graeme, for your insights. If you are interested in learning more, then please head to our website – ucem.ac.uk – and head to the programme section of the menu to learn more about the BSc (Hons) Construction Management programme. Thanks for listening.