



# **Building A Successful Firm**

**Finding Business, Making Money**



# **Back to Basics – The Business Model**

**Your company exists to provide  
professional design services for clients  
at a profit for the owners.**

# Back to Basics – The Marketing Concept

**Marketing concept:** without clients your company will not survive. To win clients you must discover their needs (wants, desires) and meet those needs with services that meet their criteria of quality, schedule and price.

The 4 P's of marketing: product (service), promotion, place (distribution) and price.

# Back to Basics – The Professional's Dilemma

- As professional engineers we have an **obligation** to safeguard the public health, safety and well-being.
- At times our professional obligations shape our relationship with our clients: they are not "always right".
- The best designers often meet professional obligations and the needs of clients.

# Opportunity for Growth

The background features a composite image. On the left, a portion of the Earth is visible against a blue sky with white clouds. In the center, a large, semi-transparent blue arrow points downwards. Surrounding the arrow are several hands of different skin tones, some holding a white plastic pipe and others holding a clear glass bowl, suggesting themes of global unity, growth, and shared resources.

- How do you react when you are both the most knowledgeable and the least influential person in the room?
- "Lord, grant me the strength to change what I should change, the patience to accept what I cannot change and the wisdom to recognize the difference."

# Career Paths for Young Professionals

- **Technical expert**: responsible for the content which clients seek (product).
- **Project manager**: responsible for the delivery of the content (place).
- **Marketing champion**: responsible for discerning client's needs and matching services (promotion).
- **Business manager**: responsible for running the enterprise (price).

# Career Paths for Young Professionals

Early in career:

- can easily **change** paths.
- often **straddle** two or three paths.
- must **choose to excel** (mentor, educate, stretch).
- will find it beneficial to **understand** the key drivers of all the paths.

# Career Paths for Young Professionals

**At some point you must choose a path. Then you will need to focus on your path and forego the other paths. Otherwise you will frustrate yourself and fail to achieve excellence.**

“No choice” is a choice.  
No choice is irreversible.



# Career Paths for Young Professionals

Measurements of success:

- **Technical expert**: chargeability, rate, recognition, committee work.
- **Project manager**: meeting schedule and budget, customer satisfaction, scope growth.
- **Marketing champion**: hit rate on proposals, repeat business, sales growth.
- **Business manager**: profitability, stability, growth of unit, recognition for company.

# Career Paths for Young Professionals

- **Remember: the cornerstone and keystone of your success are client satisfaction and owner recognition.**
- The path is the same whether you work for a company, a government, a non-profit organization, an university or yourself. Only the definition of “client” and “owner” changes.

# Finding Business, Making Money

- The paths of Technical Expert and Project Manager are covered quite well at university and technical school.
- The paths of Marketing Champion (**Finding Business**) and Business Manager (**Making Money**) are the focus of continuing education and business associations such as ACEC (this conference, you).

# Finding Business

The background features a composite image. On the left, a portion of the Earth is visible against a blue sky with white clouds. In the center and right, several hands are shown in a circular arrangement, holding a transparent globe. A white ladder is also visible, extending from the top right towards the center. A large, light blue arrow points upwards from the bottom center towards the top center.

The difference between a salesman and a marketing champion:

- A **salesman** will make promises of which the technical expert and project manager are unaware and are committed to keep.
- A **marketing champion** will learn the needs of the client and the capabilities of the firm and bring the two together.

# Finding Business



## Key characteristics of marketing champions:

- want to make a difference
- know their business well
- know their clients well
- have broad knowledge
- are curious
- like people

# Finding Business

## The good news:

- few engineers aspire to marketing – little competition!
- all AE firms need marketing champions.
- you can test aptitude early in career.
- you may already be a champion for one client group.
- champions have excellent career security.

# Finding Business

## How do you become a champion?

- tell your manager (performance review, mentoring session)
- demonstrate your interest in marketing and business development
- build your own “book” (client contacts at your level, classmates, volunteer for business organizations, sports groups, professional associations, etc)

# Making Money

**Business management is deceptively simple:**

- arithmetic, not math.
- spread sheets, not computer models.
- basic, stand-alone tasks, not flow charts.
- gardening, not terra-forming.
- people, not projects.
- contracts, not design briefs.





# Making Money

Bart Simpson on management:

**“With your smarts and my ability to exploit people with smarts, we can accomplish anything!”**

# Making Money

## Some wisdom about management:

- “You must learn how to say one word and that word is “no”.
- “All new managers are soon faced with the decision of being liked or being respected. There is a right choice.”
- “No good deed goes unpunished.”
- “Always do the right thing because you will be criticized regardless.”

# Making Money

## Key characteristics of managers:

- want to make a difference.
- willing to make decisions, even with incomplete information.
- know business well
- like coaching, mentoring.
- are comfortable with ambiguity.
- communicate well.
- act with integrity.

# Making Money

## How do you become a business manager?

- perform well in current role (on time, on budget, customer satisfaction)
- tell your manager (performance review, mentoring session)
- demonstrate your interest in management and business matters (courses).



# Finding Business, Making Money

Regardless of the career path a young professional should have a basic knowledge of the consulting engineering business:

- **“How Consulting Engineers Make Money”**
- **“The Best Practice for Selecting a Consulting Engineer”.**

# How Consulting Engineers Make Money

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Andrew Steeves

June, 2010

# **A. SALARY & BENEFITS**

Let's start with you. You are a junior engineer or tech working in the Atlantic Provinces. Your firm is competing with a wide range of national and local firms.

1.0 Salary = 100% (use \$50 000 to simplify calculations)

Assuming a work year of 2000 hours (without overtime) you are paid \$25 per hour.

The largest single cost by far in our industry is wages.

# A. SALARY & BENEFITS (cont'd)

## 4.1 Summary of Cash Benefits (company portion):

	Base Salary	100.00%	\$50 000
Mandatory/ Government	EI	2.42%	1 024
	CPP	4.95%	2 292
	Worker's	0.23%	115
Discretionary Cash Benefits	RRSP	5.00%	2 500
	Insurances	3.86%	1 932
	Training	1.50%	750
	Extras	<u>5.00%</u>	<u>2 500</u>

**TOTAL = 122.23% of \$50,000**

(for an employee earning \$50,000 for 260 "working days" per year.  
Rounded value based on dollar cost.)



# BENEFITS DILEMMA

Notice how the costs for *employers* have risen while *your* take-home pay has decreased! Also notice how most benefits are in the form of “bad news” (insurance has value only if you use it) or patience (the “million dollar” RRSP is realized after 30 years) while salary is immediate.

# **A. SALARY & BENEFITS (cont'd)**

## **4.2 Time Benefits:**

**They do not require extra payments but rather reduce the amount of available, working time.**

**260.0 "work" days/year (52 weeks at 5 days)**

**less 20.0 vacation days**

**less 10.0 statutory holidays**

**less 3.5 sick days**

**less 3.5 training days**

**223.0 available work days**

**= 85.8% *availability***

## **A. SALARY & BENEFITS (cont'd)**

To cover the costs of your salary and benefits your company would need to charge clients 1.425 times your salary (that is \$35.62 per hour) *and* be able to charge 100% of your available time (223 days per year).

This level of chargeability would be unusual but could occur if you were seconded to a client for an extended period, say 2+ years.

## **B. CHARGEABILITY**

(source: numerous industry publications)

**What is typical chargeability?**

**For an entire company including office staff, managers, accounting, human resources a value of 65% D/S is a common standard (where D represents all direct or chargeable hours - overtime or regular - and S is the standard work year in hours (1950 - 2210 hours)).**

## **B. CHARGEABILITY**

**Payroll Cost/chargeable work hour**

$$= 122.23\% \div 0.65$$

$$= 188.05\% \text{ of} \\ \text{salary/chargeable hour}$$

**Remember this rate is based upon the average chargeability for the entire firm. Your own chargeability may 80% or more.**

## C. OFFICE COSTS

(source: numerous industry publications)

### *Reality Check:*

You are on payroll but still working at home using your own kitchen table, telephone, office supplies, and computer. To set you up in an office, the company must pay these costs.

## C. OFFICE COSTS

(source: numerous industry publications)

<b>Rent</b>	<b>9.0% of salary</b>	<b>\$4500</b>
<b>Telephone/Fax</b>	<b>2.0%</b>	<b>1000</b>
<b>Postage/courier</b>	<b>0.2%</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Office Supplies, Books, Publications</b>	<b>1.5%</b>	<b>750</b>
<b>Equipment (rental + depreciation)</b>	<b><u>5.0%</u></b>	<b><u>2500</u></b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>17.7%</b>	<b>\$8850</b>

# **D. MARKETING EXPENSES**

(source: numerous industry publications)

To get projects, we need staff to market.

Marketing expenses typically run at 5% of salary (travel, proposals, receptions, documents, meetings).

Marketing and proposal time are part of nonchargeable time and is already covered.



## **E. BUSINESS EXPENSES**

(source: numerous industry publications)

Then there are business expenses incurred and required to keep the company a viable entity:

<b>Bank Charges, Interest</b>	<b>2.0% of salary</b>	<b>\$1000</b>
<b>Write-offs, Bad Debts, Uncollectible</b>	<b>1.0%</b>	<b>500</b>
<b>Dues, Fees, Donations</b>	<b>1.0%</b>	<b>500</b>
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	<b><u>7.5%</u></b>	<b><u>3750</u></b>
	<b>11.5%</b>	<b>\$5750</b>

# F: TOTAL EXPENSES

Thus, total expenses to keep an employee are:

Salary	100% of salary	\$50 000
Cash Benefits	22.23	11 115
Office Expenses	17.70	8 850
Marketing Expenses	5.00	2 500
Business Expenses	<u>11.50</u>	<u>5 750</u>
	156.43%	\$78 215 of salary

## **F: TOTAL EXPENSES**

**These expenses are covered by chargeable hours which in turn represent 65% of an average employee's work year.**

$$\begin{aligned} & 156.43\% \div 0.65 \\ & = 240.66\% \end{aligned}$$

**∴ Breakeven charge out rate = 240.7% of salary.**

## **G. BILLABLE RATES**

**The rate of 240.7% is based upon the assumption that every chargeable hour can be billed. Often this is not the case due to “learning the ropes”, rework and scope changes.**

**Some projects lose money. This has serious effects on a group's business performance (a \$10,000 loss will require \$100,000 in new billings to recover - if that project makes a 10% profit. This is almost equivalent to a person year of revenue).**

## **G. BILLABLE RATES (cont'd)**

Using 90% as a value for billability, the charge out rate becomes 267.4%.

The Value of Quality Control and good team communications: a 10% reduction on rework would result in a multiplier of 264.7%. Reducing rework is a powerful argument for a quality system.

## **H. PROFITABLE RATES**

**So far, there is no profit for acquisitions, major purchases/renovations or shareholders' dividends - just for bonuses for staff performance.**

**In our industry, 15% profit on net billings is a good year, 5% is a mediocre year, and 0% (or less) occurs far too often. Several CE firms listed on the stock exchanges make profits in the 5 to 12% range. According to PSMJ and DPIC top private firms make 15 to 25%.**

## H. PROFITABLE RATES (cont'd)

- Profitability is precarious. Consider an eight person firm with annual fee revenues of \$ 1 million. At 10% profit it earns \$100,000 a year. But:
  - The profit is the last money to be paid.
  - Profits are subject to negative leverage. A 10% increase in costs from \$900,000 to \$990,000 results in a 90% reduction in profit - unless rates can be increased.
  - Rates are “sticky”, costs are not. Often rates can be raised only at set times such as January 1, anniversary dates in contracts or after negotiation.

# **I. CHARGES VERSUS COSTS**

**Key consideration: most projects are not charged on a cost basis but all jobs need to be budgeted to ensure that expenses are covered.**

**Too often price is set on the basis of “winning the job” a practice which hurts the industry, will hurt the winning firm and will eventually hurt the client.**

**Over the long term you want poorly run competitors to lose money on their projects.**



# I. CHARGES VERSUS COSTS (cont'd)

**A word about Standard Rates. Most firms charge a set rate for categories of employees (say P1s) rather than using different rate for each employee.**

**These Standard Rates are based upon the average salary for the category times the standard multiplier (say 2.94). Most clients are quite comfortable with this approach.**

**Many provincial associations (professional, CE) publish tables of standard rates. They are often intended to be the minimum rates but many clients treat them as maximums.**

# I. CHARGES VERSUS COSTS (cont'd)

## Common methods of charging:

- a) **Fixed fee.** “We will do the project as defined in the attached scope for \_\_\_\_”. Standard rates are used, may offer discounts if assignment is long-term, employees are seconded, etc. or premium rates if the project has urgency. Rewards CE for innovation and efficiency.
  
- b) **Fixed fee (soft).** “Based upon the attached scope we estimate that the project will cost \$ \_\_\_\_ with extras charged at \$ \_\_\_\_”. Overruns require justification.

# I. CHARGES VERSUS COSTS (cont'd)

- c) Percentage of construction cost. Commonly used in the building industry (“design fees for a primary school at X% of construction cost”). A difficult method which favours clients on both below-cost and over-cost projects. CE may be penalized if construction market is cold (construction costs low) or high (client may insist on a redesign). CE may not receive value for innovation, LEED content or life cycle considerations.

# I. CHARGES VERSUS COSTS (cont'd)

- d) **Cost.** The client hires the CE to do the project and will pay by the hour until completion with costs reimbursed. There may be adjustments for favoured clients (down) or priority projects (up).
- e) **Cost plus.** The same as cost except that a profit factor is negotiated and included.
- f) **Value.** There are many variations including fee for result, shared savings on construction costs, bonus for time saved, gain sharing of reduced operations and maintenance. Generally CE is a “trusted advisor and partner”.

# Sample Calculations

- What to charge for the secondment of an employee to a client:

- for 3 months
- for 9 months
- for 2 years

(Costs to consider: rent, phone, employees expenses, marketing, chargeability).

- What to charge a client with long-term relationship and annual billings > \$1 million. (Considerations: relationships, efficiencies [to client, for you], need for profit).

# Sample Calculations (cont'd)

- What is breakeven charge out rate for summer students:
  - few benefits
  - rent (yes or no)
  - re-work
- A client insists that you buy a software package which he says will reduce your design time by 25%. What is the new charge out rate? (higher costs for software and training, fewer chargeable hours, reaction of competitors).

# Questions?

**A final thought: Many staff in competing firms and most staff in client organizations do not know the basis for your fees. Oftentimes they think that your salary is close to your charge out rate!**

# Appendices

Details of Calculations,  
Assumptions,  
Background Information



## A. SALARY & BENEFITS (cont'd)

### 2.0 Government Charges/Benefits: (source: Government of Canada)

a) EI = 2.42% of salary  
(up to \$42 300)

b) CPP = 4.95% of salary  
(up to \$46 300)

c) Worker's Compensation = 0.23% (NB)

d) Other jurisdictions have payroll taxes, health charges (OHIP), etc.

## A. SALARY & BENEFITS (cont'd)

### 3.0 Company Benefits: (source: CENB Salary Survey and other)

In most CE companies Employee Benefits represent the second largest cost category.

There is often greater variation in the benefits offered to staff than in the salary. For example: one firm has marketed its RRSP/DPSP plan as a “million dollar advantage” over competitors while other firms have no plans at all. Some firms offer flexible benefits while other firms define benefits narrowly.

## A. SALARY & BENEFITS (cont'd)

### 3.1 Time Benefits (non-cash, included in salary)

- a) Vacation:= 4.62% - 9.62% of salary  
From 1 d/month to 5 weeks/year depending  
upon seniority. Use 7.70% for 4 weeks/year (NB avg)
- b) Sick Leave = 1.35% of salary  
(if 3.5 d/year)
- c) Statutory Holidays = 3.85% of salary  
(if 10 d/year)
- d) Training = 1.35% of salary  
(if 3.5 d/year)

## A. SALARY & BENEFITS (cont'd)

### 3.2 Cash Benefits (Commitments)

(source: CENB Salary Survey and other)

- a) Retirement: = 3% - 7% of salary  
(for RRSP contributions)  
Use 5% for average

Note: New Brunswick has one of the highest level of employer contributions to RRSP plans with membership being compulsory.

## A. SALARY & BENEFITS (cont'd)

b) Health, Dental, Life, AD&D, LTD Insurance: Company Co-payment (typical coverage):

= \$84.00-\$161.00/month

= \$1008.00-\$1932.00/year

Use \$1932/50 000 for family coverage = 3.86% of salary

## A. SALARY & BENEFITS (cont'd)

### 3.3 Cash Benefits Discretionary

(source: numerous industry publications)

a) Training = 1.5% of salary cost  
(expenses only)

b) “Extras” (profit sharing, bonuses, social events and other incentives)  
= 5% of salary (average)

(Some NB consultants use methods other than hourly payment for overtime – such as bonuses. Typical range of overtime hours for NB firms is 3% - 12%)

## A. SALARY & BENEFITS (cont'd)

### 4.3 Payroll Cost

$$= 122.23\% \div 0.858$$

$$= 142.45\%$$

(136.6% without the payment of “extras”)

The range of 25 to 35% is often quoted as a value for “payroll burden”.

## C. OFFICE COSTS

At average chargeability, the company would have to charge a higher rate to have you work in office:

$$(122.23 + 17.7)\% \div 0.65$$

$$= 215.3\% \text{ of salary per chargeable hour}$$

This yields a charge out rate of \$53.82 per hour.



## D. MARKETING EXPENSES

Now the company would need to charge:

$$(122.23 + 17.7 + 5.0)\% \div 0.65 = 223.0\% \text{ of salary/chargeable hour)}$$

## E. BUSINESS EXPENSES (cont'd)

Note: If Bad Debts are kept at 1%, many consulting engineers think that they have done well. Miscellaneous costs may seem large at 7.5% but most managers will confirm that "the little things really do add up".

## **E. BUSINESS EXPENSES (cont'd)**

**Miscellaneous (7.5%)** is comprised of expenses such as professional and business insurance (2 to 5%), legal and accounting fees (1.5 to 2%), recruitment (0 to 1%), personnel services (0 to 1%) and a host of other expenses.

Subcontractors fees are not part of the charge out calculation. They are incremental to the fees charged to clients.

## H. PROFITABLE RATES (cont'd)

To achieve:

20% profit, the rate becomes 320%

15% profit, the rate becomes 307%,

10% profit, the rate becomes 294%,

5% profit, the rate becomes 281%,

0% profit, the rate remains at 267%.

## H. PROFITABLE RATES (cont'd)

Profit is the source of funds for growth, investment in the enterprise, return on risk capital for the owners and a means of attracting new investors for ownership transition.

Most firms are sold because current staff are unwilling to invest in the company. In other words they perceive the reward of investment to be too low, that is the profit level is not high enough.

## Sample Calculations (cont'd)

- Darkside Engineering, your arch-competitor recently won an assignment with a fee estimate 20% below yours. With your understanding of costs and rates you can analyze the situation and obtain insights for the next proposal call.
  - **Fact:** too often we accuse each other of low balling rates when the real situation is more complicated.
  - **Lesson:** little is learned from superficial analysis and lazy thinking.

*Let us do some analysis -*

## Sample Calculations (cont'd)

- Scenario 1: Apples to apples (you and Darkside interpreted the requirements the same and responded similarly):
  - ❖ Explanation A: you blundered (too much effort).
  - ❖ Explanation B: Darkside blundered (too little effort and no profit; do not know their costs).
  - ❖ Explanation C: Darkside is “buying the job” (no profit, not all hours charged).
  - ❖ Explanation D: Darkside has discovered a game changer (unlikely, an example would be a cookie-cutter or a new technology).

## Sample Calculations (cont'd)

- Scenario 2: Apples to oranges (your interpretations and submissions were different from those of Darkside):
  - ❖ Explanation A: You misheard the client (too complicated).
  - ❖ Explanation B: Darkside misheard the client (too simple).
  - ❖ Explanation C: Darkside deliberately simplified the proposal and hopes to recoup with extras or follow-up work.
  - ❖ Explanation D: Darkside talked to the client and you did not.





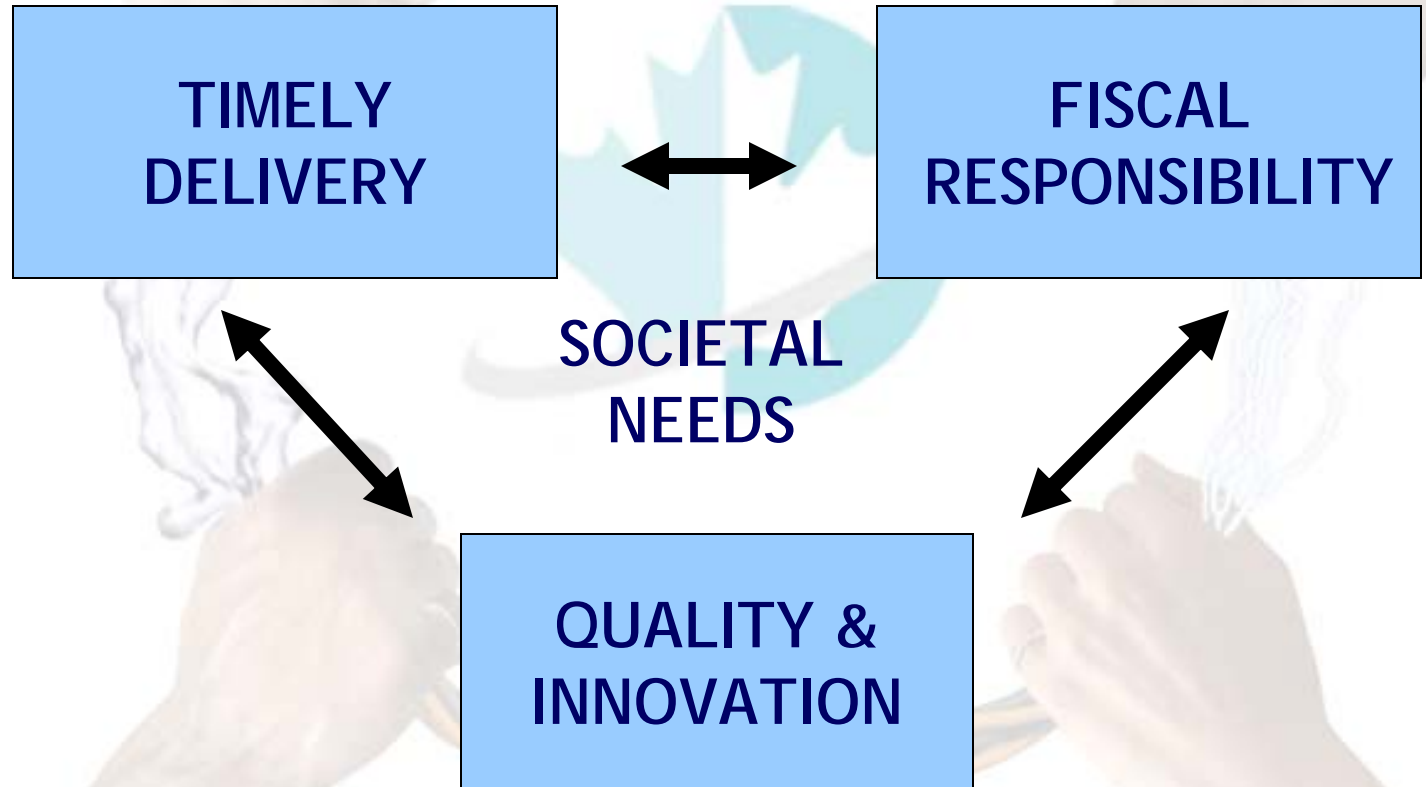
**The Best Practice  
for  
Procuring Engineering  
Services**

The background features a composite image. On the left, a portion of a blue globe with white clouds is visible. In the center and right, several hands are shown in a circular arrangement, holding a white model of a bridge. A large, semi-transparent teal arrow points upwards from the center of the hands. The overall theme is global collaboration and infrastructure.

# Association of Consulting Engineering Companies - Canada

- Represents close to 500 consulting engineering companies employing over 100,000 Canadians
- Advocates sustainable infrastructure investment
- Members offer professional engineering services world wide to private sector and government clients
- Part of the International Federation of Consulting Engineers (FIDIC)

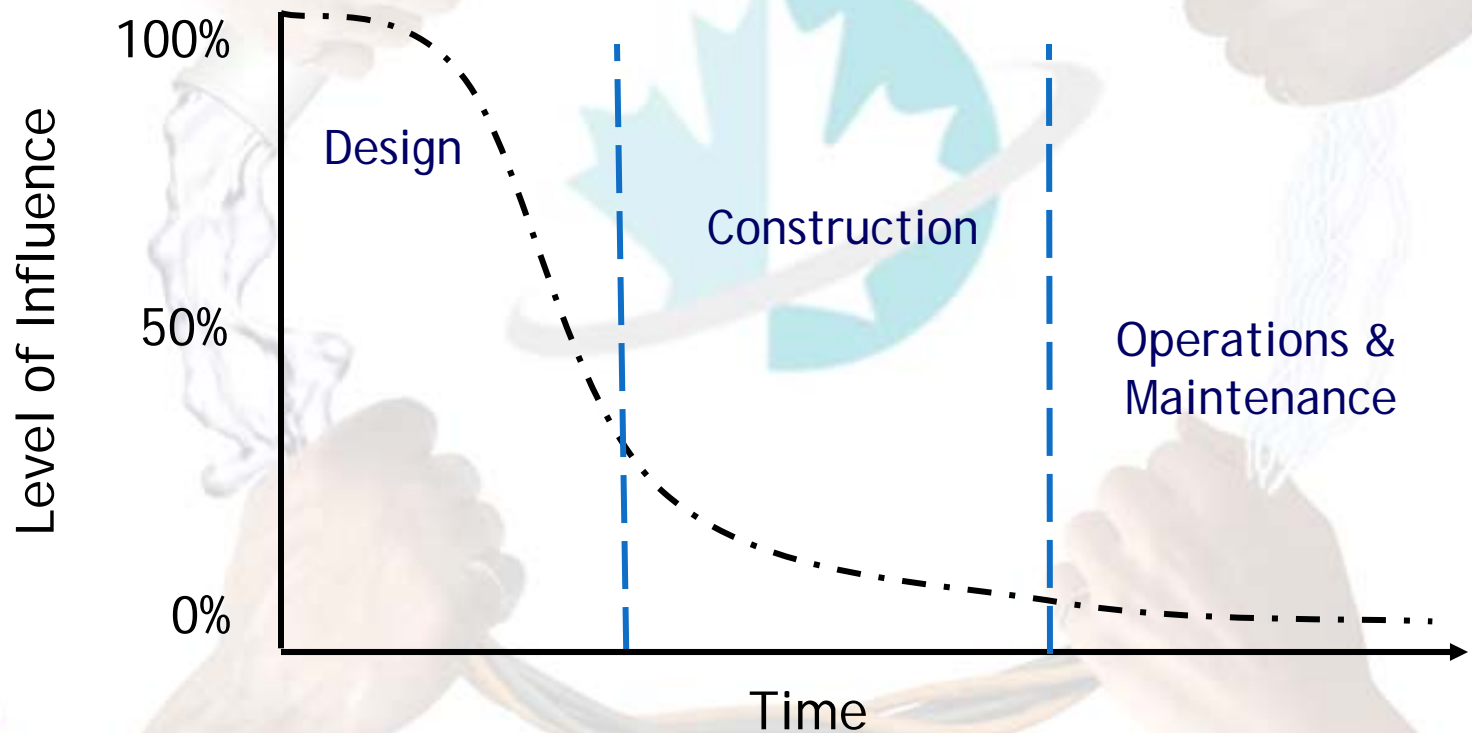
# The challenge of delivering projects



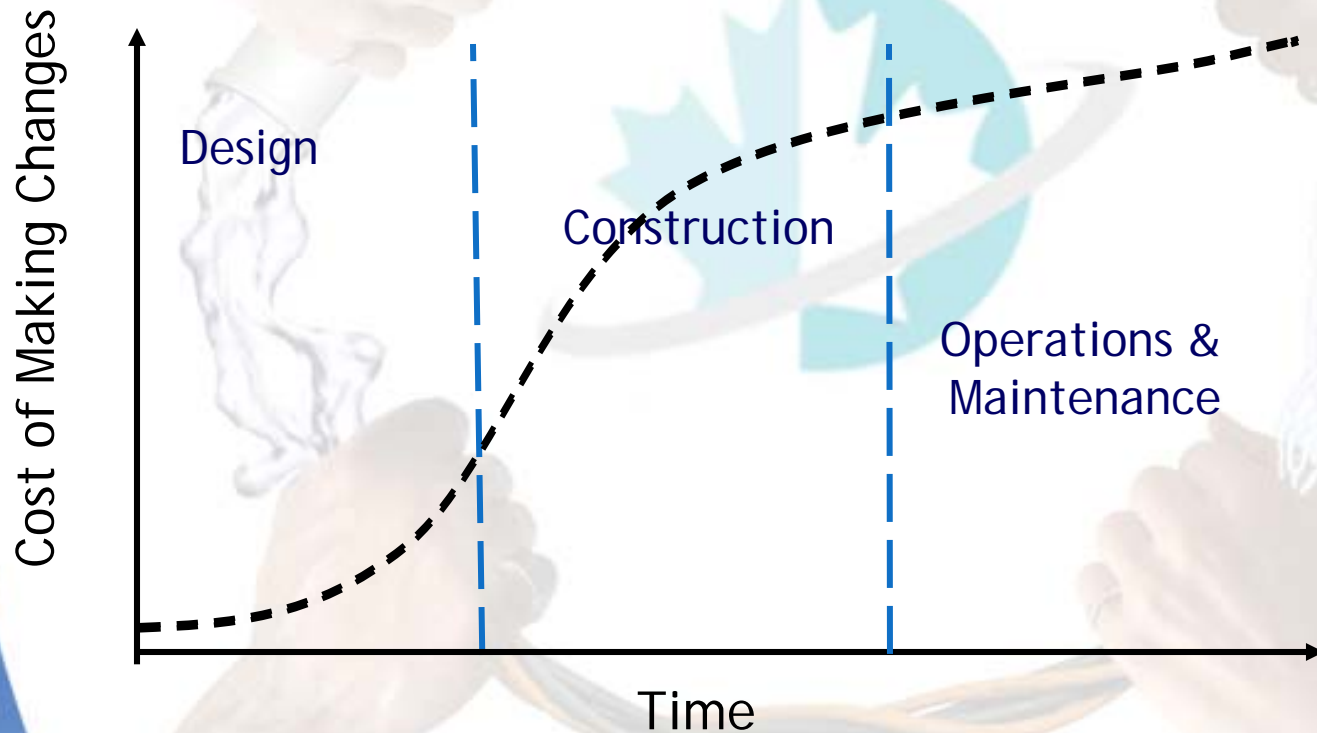
# How do we achieve...

- Long-term savings through reduced life-cycle costs?
- Timely delivery?
- Quality and sustainability?
- Innovation and added value?
- Improved economic, social and environmental quality of life?
- Strong consulting engineering sector?
- Taxpayer confidence?

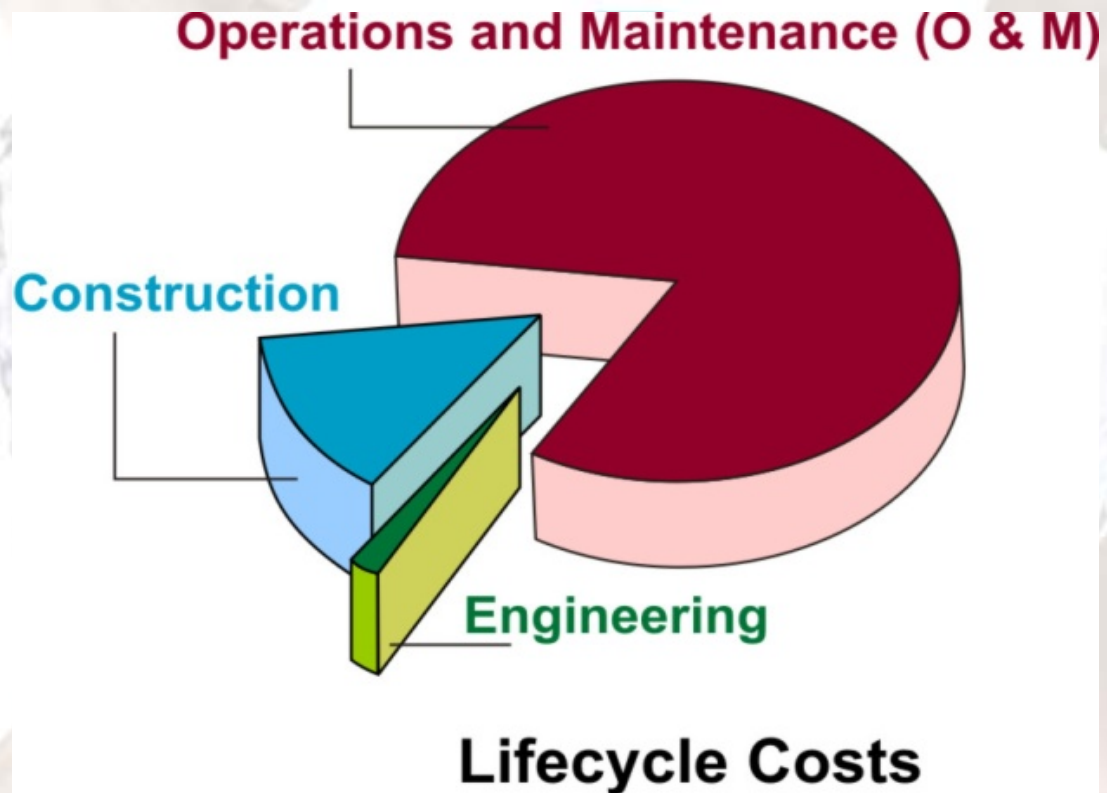
# Opportunities to improve outcome



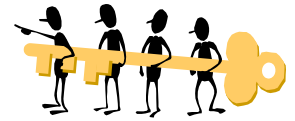
# Opportunities to improve outcome



# Engineering is a good investment



# Procurement is the key

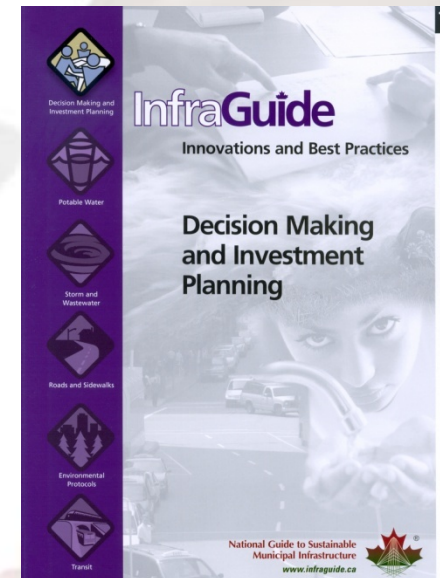


- Establishing common objectives and agreeing on desired outcome
- Understanding cost-benefit-risk relationships
- Clarifying roles and responsibilities (trusted advisor)
- Selecting the right team for the job (qualifications)
- Determining needed resources (fees and schedule)



# Selecting a Professional Consultant

- An *InfraGuide* "Best Practice" (June 2006)
- Developed by the public sector – for the public sector
- Supported by extensive interviews and research
- "The recommended consultant selection process is a competitive qualifications-based process"



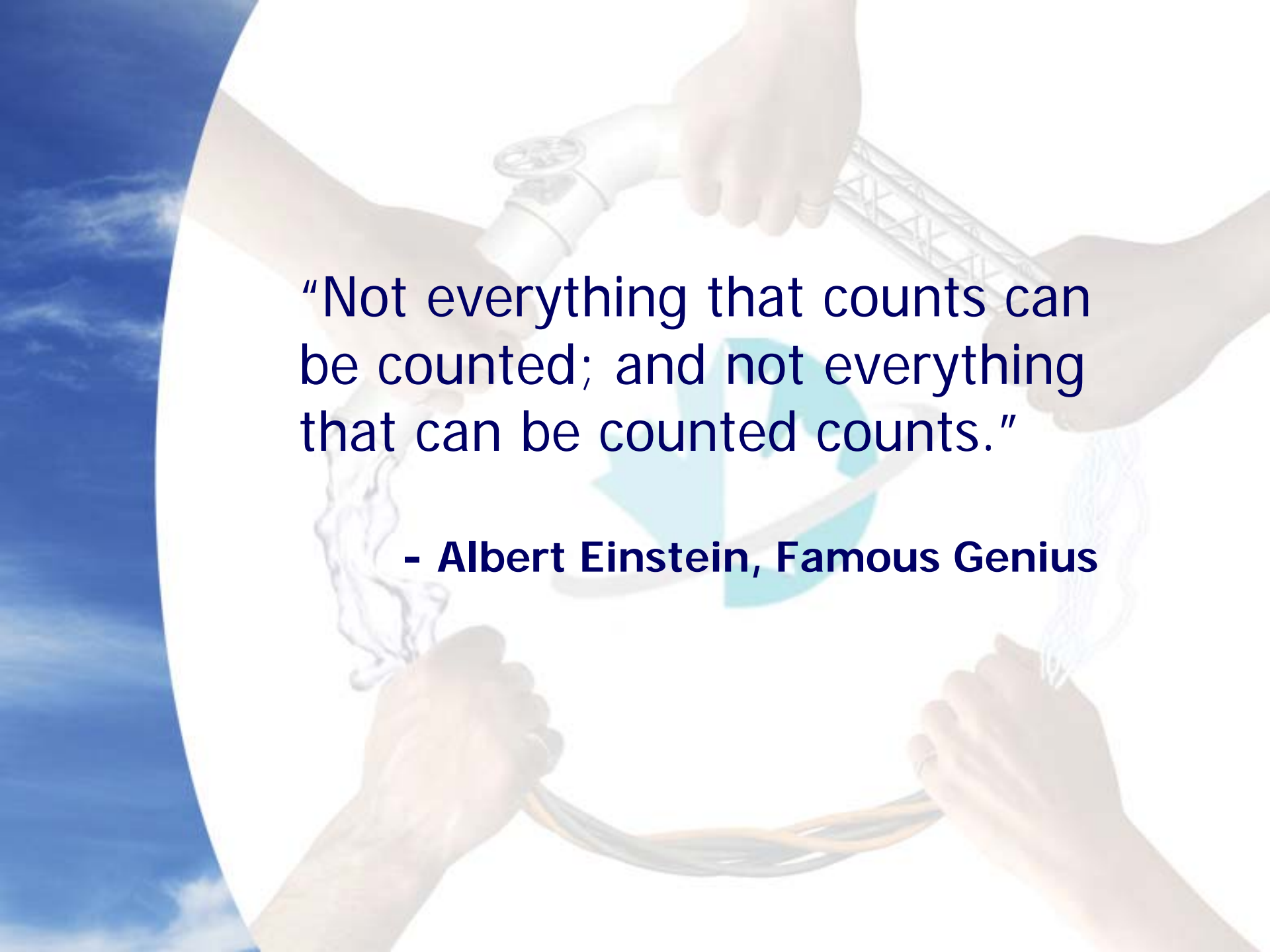
# About *InfraGuide*

- *National Guide to Sustainable Municipal Infrastructure:*
  - Federation of Canadian Municipalities
  - National Research Council
  - Infrastructure Canada
  - Canadian Public Works Association
- Recognized national network of experts in public and municipal infrastructure
- Publisher of over 50 “Best Practice” documents supporting sustainable infrastructure decisions

The background of the slide features a collage of images. On the left, there is a curved view of the Earth from space, showing blue oceans and white clouds. Overlaid on this are several hands in various skin tones. One hand is holding a small globe of the Earth. Another hand is holding a white model of a truss bridge. A third hand is holding a clear glass filled with a golden liquid, possibly oil or honey. The overall theme suggests global cooperation, engineering, and resource management.

# How does the best practice work?

- Professionals compete based on qualifications and on understanding of the client's needs
- The client ranks the proposals based on providing the best service and achieving project objectives
- A detailed scope, including deliverables, that achieves the client's objectives is established with preferred proponent
- Appropriate fees and schedule that achieves the client's objectives are negotiated



“Not everything that counts can be counted; and not everything that can be counted counts.”

**- Albert Einstein, Famous Genius**

# What's wrong with the lowest price?

- Rewards firms for using fewer resources on behalf of the client (e.g. less experienced and less senior staff)
- Penalizes firms with greater appreciation of the client's needs
- Penalizes firms that accurately anticipate complications or that propose innovation
- Increased cost to client (more staff time and resources)



“It is unwise to pay too much, but it is worse to pay too little.

When you pay too little, you sometimes lose everything... because the thing you bought was incapable of doing the thing you bought it to do.”

**- John Ruskin, Social Critic & Author**

# Best practice is good policy

- Competitive and transparent process focusing on merit, quality and long-term value
- Long-term savings realized over decades
- Encourages in-house expertise to represent the client's (and taxpayer's) interests
- Permits innovation and sustainable infrastructure
- Allows for creative risk management

# What's in it for the client?

- The client gets the right team for the right job
- More realistic schedules and budgets
- Fewer change orders and disputes
- Better business relationship between the client/consultants/contractors/external agencies
- Better service, better quality & better value for taxpayers



# Who uses this approach?

- This approach is legislated by the US federal government and 44 state governments
- It is used by municipalities across the US and Canada – including the City of Calgary and the City of London
- The Government of Quebec recently passed legislation requiring its ministries and agencies to use QBS for architectural and engineering services

## **QBS works** (APWA Study 2009)

- Georgia Institute of Technology and University of Colorado reviewed over 200 projects across US
- 93% of clients expressed high or very high satisfaction with consultants selected using QBS
- QBS reduced construction cost growth by 70 %
- QBS reduced construction schedule growth by 20%
- QBS provided better ability to address societal issues or stakeholder concerns

## Association of Consulting Engineering Companies - Canada

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## InfraGuide

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