



## ***Arboricultural consultancy; an impossible dream or an achievable aspiration!***

*(Article 1/3 for Arboriculture Australia's The Bark – December 2012)*

*This article is adapted from an original article published in the Arb Magazine ([www.trees.org.uk](http://www.trees.org.uk)).*

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In this first article of a three-part series on professionalism, Jeremy Barrell, an English tree consultant based near London, offers a British perspective on the demands of professional practice in a commercial world. Arboriculture is a relatively new business in Britain, with its formal beginnings only dating back to the 1960s and 1970s. After a very slow start, caring for trees in the urban environment is now a thriving enterprise with great prospects for those who choose it as a career. However, climbing up the professional ladder by moving into tree consultancy brings with it a host of daunting challenges. Applying high ethical standards in a competitive market place creates a range of dilemmas that have to be resolved if you have any aspirations of professional recognition. Jeremy explores these complex issues, with a host of practical tips from his experience of trying to get the balance right, finishing with some hints on how you may be able to enhance your own career prospects.

### **Climate change is focusing attention on trees and tree managers**

In Britain, tree consultancy is evolving at breakneck speed, driven by the momentum of climate change and the emerging realization by government that trees do make a difference. Toward the end of the 1990s, the bulk of consultancy work focused on advising homeowners what tree bits to chop off to give them more sun (we don't get much sun over here!). In the following decade, the emphasis dramatically shifted to increasing canopy cover, rather than trying to get rid of it. The pace of change has been staggering, because although urban trees are not a solution to the underlying carbon generation problem, they play an important role in buffering urban temperature rises — and that matters. Heat in our streets directly affects the public. It's not difficult to understand it's going to get hot and trees will make life more comfortable. The importance of trees is now widely acknowledged, but does arboriculture have the professional infrastructure to deliver the management expertise that will inevitably be demanded?

In a broader context, The Climate Change Act (2008) ([www.legislation.gov.uk/](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/)) legally binds

Britain to achieving massive reductions in carbon generation, aiming to avert the most extreme predictions through mitigation plans and to reduce the physical impact on our population through adaptation measures. Although life seems to be dominated by world-wide ailing economies right now, there is little doubt that climate change will drive future decision-making and the pressure to move our lives onto a sustainable footing is becoming an obvious priority.

Beyond the short-term economic distractions, increasing canopy cover where we live and work has tremendous potential to make life more comfortable during the expected weather extremes. Advising on climate adaptation holds a strong and vibrant future for arborists because tree benefits are numerous, the public has an instinctive affinity towards trees and we have the management expertise to deliver green relief when it will be most needed. No other professionals can do this; that is why arborists matter and why there is a great future in arboriculture.



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### Developing the skills to meet future needs

If arborists are to effectively service the increased demand for management skills, then they need to match the standards of delivery set by other recognized professions, such as surveyors, planners, and lawyers. However, arboriculture is relatively small and young compared to these more established disciplines, and many of the detailed protocols and procedures needed to supply a full spectrum of consultancy services have not yet been developed. Professional practice demands high ethical standards of behavior, a capacity to clearly reason and communicate, and the ability to write — skills that the practically orientated often find difficult to master. Although there is still much work to do in developing high-end professional services, there is a wealth of practical expertise at the craft level, which is an essential prerequisite for delivering management solutions that work. In short, many arborists are in good shape in terms of practical expertise, but a focus on developing professional practices should be a priority for every individual wishing to move into consultancy.



The principles of professional practice are the same whether you are outside or in an office.

### Principles of professional behaviour

Arboriculture has a very strong craft origin; most of us have some sort of grounding in the practicalities of working outside with plants and an instinctive empathy with the natural environment. From that background,

a move indoors to an office environment can seem daunting, but is it that hard and are the rules that different? Of course, it is more manicured, but the basics of successful business are the same wherever you work, and a professional attitude is an essential part of that recipe. As careers develop from craft through to advisory levels, how to behave as a professional becomes an increasingly important part of daily business life.

In the US, the American Society of Consulting Arborists ([www.asca-consultants.org](http://www.asca-consultants.org)) has developed a set of Standards of Professional Practice for its Registered Consultants, which provide some very useful insights into primary principles of professional behaviour. It advocates that professionalism can be distilled down to a list of duties that consultants should strive to comply with, which include:

- **Competence** – working to a measured standard
- **Due care** – a level of performance necessary to fulfil specified requirements measured against a standard of care
- **Impartiality** – acting as a disinterested and unbiased third party
- **Independence** – free from influence, control or domination
- **Integrity** – candid, fair, honest and of sound moral principle
- **Objectivity** – free from personal influences, emotions or prejudices
- **Public trust** – honouring the public trust in professionals and serving the public interest

Unsurprisingly, such principles are also a mainstay of traditional professional practice outside the US, but how do these translate to the modern business arena?

### Professional practice in a commercial world

At the managerial and advisory level, everyone has a professional duty to know and comply with these ethical principles, but the reality is that they are not the only





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consideration in a competitive commercial world. It would be quite feasible to diligently observe them all and be out of business in a matter of months if the figures did not add up! The challenge for modern professionals in business is to make a profit, whilst not straying beyond this professional duty framework, despite all the temptations and distractions of the commercial environment. A tough task that is more about psychology than rigidly following a set of pre-determined rules. Understanding the social interactions between the people in a team, and between that team and its clients, is an essential part of business success; complying with professional duties in isolation is simply not enough!

Culture is the 'way we do things round here'; the shared beliefs and practices that identify a group of people and separate them from the crowd. Culture matters because it sets the boundaries for business behaviour, which, in turn, has a significant impact on reputation. Obviously, professional ethics are important and have to be a primary consideration, but how to run a successful business at the same time is always going to be a challenge. Of course, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' set of solutions, and there are certainly no simple answers, but here are a few insights that may make a difference for you.

### Communication

It is tempting in this modern world of instant communication to dismiss traditional principles of business as irrelevant and old-fashioned. Why waste time with a phone call when an email will do; why travel for hours for a meeting when a phone call is much more efficient? It all seems so obvious because intuitively, easier is better, and yet it completely disregards the human (psychological) dimension that has been the backbone of business since commerce began. Beneath the business façade, clients are ordinary people, just like each of us, with many of the same anxieties and psychological requirements; we like meeting

face-to-face, seeing who we are dealing with, feeling confident our affairs are in safe hands, and seeing reactions with our own eyes. These little things matter in a big way, and yet there is intense pressure to disregard the basics in the clamour for progress.

It is very easy to favour the illusion that the rather 'fluffy' human aspects of business are somehow less important than the more measureable textbook objectives, such as efficiency and profit. Indeed, an increasingly common business model is to save on office overheads by employees working from home, relying on the internet for internal communication. Of course, it's efficient on paper, but does it build an enduring team to match the performance that regular face-to-face contact can deliver? Feeling isolated, without the ability to interact with colleagues on the same level, is a common complaint for many professionals just starting out; it is obviously important. In addition to the psychological benefits of being able to meet and talk, productivity can improve as well. Opportunities to discuss and analyse issues can help solve problems faster and more efficiently. Face-to-face communication is important, but the starting point is to appreciate the hidden value of the process and then invest in the time it consumes.



Meeting face-to-face is good business, a home-truth that is easily forgotten in the clamor for efficiency.

The same principle applies to communicating with clients; talking is better than emailing, but meeting is the best. This all takes



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precious time, but the benefits in terms of client confidence often more than justify the effort. Automated phone systems and bulk processing sound attractive if short-term profits are the priority, but however old fashioned it may seem, building personal relationships is an enduring strategy because, for whatever reason, it works.

### Background Administration

Nobody likes mistakes, but imperfection is an integral part of human nature; we all have off-days and sometimes it simply goes wrong! Reducing errors to a minimum is one of the most challenging aspects of modern consultancy, but failing to grasp this thorny issue can have serious professional consequences. Progressive businesses will always analyze errors because it minimizes the chance of repeating the same mistake. Similarly, proofing all draft documents before publication by a person other than the author is an essential safeguard. In the same vein, accurate and reliable records are a cornerstone of professional practice. Logging every phone call, conversation and action for each project, along with the time spent to the minute, may seem tedious, but it is an essential prerequisite of long-term success. Administration is resource-hungry, but it is a mainstay of professional practice, and businesses ignore it at their peril.



An efficient and well-organized administration is a cornerstone of professional practice.

### Service

Good business in the modern era is very much about speed; response, processing and delivery all have to be fast. Answering the phone within a few rings, getting quotes back by return and being able to email document copies while the client is on the phone should be normal, not the exception.

Many of us will be familiar with paper files and feel comfortable with them, but their big disadvantage is that they can only be in one place at a time. In contrast, an electronic file management system allows access by anyone in the office at any time. This means any client can be updated about progress on their project by anyone in the office at the time of their phone call.

A common anxiety for clients is the worry that a report may be late. This can be overcome by adopting a method of due-dates and regular client updating, where the client is told the precise date when the report will be delivered and kept informed on progress. Again, it requires administration, but the big benefit is that client anxiety is significantly reduced. As we all know, not honouring promises is extremely damaging, but sometimes unavoidable. Where a project is expected to run over on time, it is much better to tell the client and reschedule, rather than say nothing with the inevitable stress that will cause.

Going that little bit further than expected is a great way of building client confidence. It demonstrates genuine commitment and care, which are so often missing from the superficial product-to-profit management model. Within the bounds of the contractual agreement, nothing should be too much for you to do for your clients. Your role is to take control of their problems and deliver solutions, relieving them of all anxiety in the process. If you adopt a culture of solving problems, not creating them, then you should take the strain – and be paid accordingly, of course!



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### Salaries and fees

On an individual level, professionalism comes at a price, one that is set by the wider salary market. If arboricultural consultancies are to retain the calibre of people necessary to interact with the legal and planning professions, then they must at least match and preferably exceed the salary and workplace packages offered by those professions. Similarly, on a business level, delivering a high quality service has high overheads and that has to be reflected in what is charged for each project. For both salaries and fees, it can be tempting to look at rates within arboriculture and build a strategy around those observations. An alternative approach is to review longer-established professions, such as surveyors and engineers, which may offer a more reliable benchmark because they have more experience at properly accounting for hidden overheads that take time to understand and appreciate. Whichever approach is favoured, at the consultancy level, clients are very interested in value for money, rather than the cheapest price, and survival in the long-term is all about getting that balance right.

There are no 'trade-secrets' here, just common sense solutions applied to common problems that are obvious if you take the time to think it through. Our experience is that there is no single skill or attribute that is the key to success. Instead, understanding all the small things that matter and then working to improve each seems to be important. This is great news for anyone with professional aspirations because it puts success well within reach. Caring about what you do and paying attention to detail are not rare gifts for the lucky, they are a mind-set that can be learnt and the benefits are accessible to all who take the time and trouble to look.

### Making the move into consultancy

Whether you are a contractor thinking about consultancy, a municipal arborist wanting to

move on, an existing consultant with hopes of moving up the ladder, or a migrant from another discipline considering a career in trees, the questions are always the same: Can arboriculture be a fulfilling career? Do you have the skills to succeed? What do you need to do? How can you find help and how do you progress as quickly as possible? If you have professional ambitions and looking for ideas on what to do next, here are three options accessible to us in Britain to help enhance our credentials. Each of the following approaches are time-consuming and require a high level of professional experience, but all have their own unique set of benefits when completed.



### Arboricultural Association (AA) Registered Consultant:

The AA is a British organization servicing both contracting and consultancy interests ([www.trees.org.uk](http://www.trees.org.uk)).

It administers a Registered Consultant scheme, which is widely accepted as one of the toughest tests of an individual's consultancy skills and achievements against a very high standard. Candidates have to submit a variety of formal reports covering a full range of consultancy matters, from construction site management through to working as an expert witness. If these meet satisfactory standards of presentation and content, the candidate is invited to an interview. The interview lasts about two hours and is intended to test the candidate's ethical competence as well as the obvious requirements of needing to write and communicate at the highest professional level. In addition to a comprehensive application pack ([www.trees.org.uk/find-a-professional/Become-an-ARB-Registered-Consultant](http://www.trees.org.uk/find-a-professional/Become-an-ARB-Registered-Consultant)), the AA offers assistance to those with ambitions to become a Registered Consultant in the form of a two-day professional practice workshop. The path to becoming an AA Registered Consultant is an extremely challenging process and not for





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the faint-hearted, but it is the ultimate achievement for any aspiring consultant. There are currently 47 individuals listed on the AA website.



### The Institute of Chartered Foresters (ICF) route to chartered status:

Chartered status has the benefit of being recognized in many countries and across most occupations as a standard measure of professional achievement. The ICF ([www.charteredforesters.org](http://www.charteredforesters.org)) administers the process in Britain and has made significant progress in the last decade to improve accessibility for arborists. Entry is at the Associate level, where a member undertakes a two-year period of recorded work, followed by a written submission and interview. Associates are expected to become Chartered within 10 years. Senior practitioners who can demonstrate their achievements can also apply directly. If successful, their experience and understanding of professional practice are explored at interview. Successful applicants can choose between the Chartered Forester or Chartered Arboriculturist designation, each conferring the same status. Once Chartered, a member is known as a Professional Member (MICFor), with the option to apply to progress up to Fellow (FICFor) after five years of membership (with at least 10 years of professional experience), making this designation a comprehensive and important consultancy achievement. In the UK, the modern challenges facing foresters and arborists are very similar and this move towards a closer working relationship between the two professions has proved particularly productive for both sides.



### The ASCA Registered Consulting Arborist (RCA): In North America, ASCA

administers the international RCA designation that is relevant to arborists around the world. To begin the process, it is compulsory to attend an ASCA Academy, run annually at a different US location each time. During four days of intense interactive training, there is a focus on report-writing skills and ethics, culminating in a 2.5-hour, 100-question, multiple-choice exam, where delegates must achieve a 70 percent mark to successfully graduate. This gains entry to the next phase, which is a succession of writing assignments, where candidates are sent a consultancy scenario and must write their own report. This is independently marked against a published set of criteria, with a passing grade of 75 percent. Two passed assignments later and the candidate moves on to the final phase, which is the submission of one of their own reports for the same marking process. Passing all the stages gains access to the ASCA consulting elite, which is no mean feat in terms of time, effort, and money, especially if you are based outside of the US!

The AA Registered Consultant is a tough route, and only the best progress, so prospective candidates need to brace themselves for a rough ride. The ICF approach is similar, with demanding written submissions and a probing interview, plus the bonus of international and cross-profession recognition. The ASCA process is different; there is a strong focus on ethics at the Academy and on writing to a prescribed template for the report submissions. However, it is equally as demanding and stands at the same level as the ICF and AA options. If full-time consultancy is your aspiration, then any one of these is a great start.

### Accessibility to non-UK residents

From an international perspective, the ASCA RCA designation is open to anyone willing to travel to an Academy and prepared to submit themselves to its rigorous testing process. It has an increasing number of consultants from outside North America and embraces



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prospective candidates, irrespective of where they are based. Turning to the AA option, although there are currently no AA Registered Consultants based outside of the UK, it has not ruled out the possibility of an international dimension to this very prestigious list. Indeed, the AA seems willing to engage with the wider consulting community and will be considering how its scheme might include those who reside and practice outside the UK. Anyone interested in the process, particularly if they wish to practice in the UK, may wish to contact the organization directly. Taking a slightly different approach, the ICF has international members, but all trained or worked in the UK when they achieved their Chartered status. Its current policy is not to award Chartered

status to overseas applicants as it has no means of monitoring professional standards beyond UK shores.

Although this article is written from a British perspective, the underlying principles of professional practice it advocates apply wherever you are in the world. In particular, the ASCA, AA and ICF options set out three different, but equally as valuable approaches to enhancing your professional credentials. Even if direct submission to any of those processes is not practical because of distance, they all provide tried and tested templates for accrediting professional achievement and the principles behind each are worthy of careful consideration by those who wish to enhance their consultancy career prospects.

### **Future articles**

**Extreme consulting; is being an expert witness for you?** Wherever you are in the world, acting as an expert witness is the pinnacle of professional practice. From the preparation of formal reports to appearing in court, find out if you have what it takes to get to the top or whether you may be happier to avoid it altogether!

**Tree risk management; a decision-making frame work for duty holders and advising arborists:** When a tree failure results in harm, the courts will be focused on the duty of care and whether it was met by the duty holder. Jeremy will discuss the English perspective on how much management is enough in the context of recent court cases and describe a strategic decision-making framework for duty holders. On a practical level, he will review a common anxiety among inspecting arborists, i.e. the worry that a tree they have inspected will fail when the wind blows. His view is that the last decade in tree management has seen a focus on complication, with an emphasis on theory at the expense of practical common sense. The sleep-tight protocol is a new take on old methods, with special consideration for the security of the inspecting arborist after a tree failure has occurred.



Jeremy Barrell has worked with trees all his life, building up a modest contracting business in the early 1980s and 1990s before concentrating on full-time consultancy in 1995. From those humble beginnings, Barrell Tree Consultancy ([www.barrelltreecare.co.uk](http://www.barrelltreecare.co.uk)) now has six consultants advising on planning and legal issues throughout the UK.