

28 A FOUNDATION
ENGINEERING TRIP

34 SPREAD FOOTINGS
REVISITED

40 SCREW PILES AND
HELICAL ANCHORS

46 FOUNDATION
ENGINEERING... 102

GEOSTRATA

JANUARY // FEBRUARY 2015

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Tell Me a Story

By John P. Bachner



Greatly disturbed by the commoditization and marginalization that seemed to be its members' lot, the Geoprofessional Business Association (GBA) several years ago began a quest to "maximize the geoprofessions' importance and value to the marketplace." Geoprofessionals everywhere were enthused by the prospect of success and sat back, waiting for it to happen. Unfortunately, sitting back and waiting was one of the principal reasons why they became commoditized and marginalized to begin with. Accordingly, without geoprofessionals at every level explaining why they merited recognition, understanding, and respect, efforts to counter their commoditization and marginalization could not gain traction. "They're great!" GBA would proclaim, almost as though geoprofessionals were Frosted Flakes. "But where are they?" people would ask. And, truth be told, they were nowhere to be seen.

Here's the deal: If you want people to recognize who you are, you have to stand up in front of them, in the spotlight, and tell them your story. You can't get recognition doing busywork backstage. Without recognition, you'll have no understanding. Without understanding, you'll have no respect.

Lawyers don't seem to have much trouble being out front, center stage, and that's why, as I was told many years ago, "The [*expletive deleted*] lawyers run everything." But I also learned that "the world is run by those who show up." As it so happens, lots of

lawyers show up, and not just those who deal with individuals one-on-one. It's also a habit among those who deal with large corporate and government entities, just the way many geoprofessionals do. Why? Because they believe in themselves. They regard the law as an extremely important profession, meaning they regard lawyers – themselves – as extremely important professionals.

Do you believe your profession is extremely important and so, therefore, are you? Do you believe you have good stories to tell? Stories worthy of the spotlight? Apparently not. Because, if you really felt that way, why would you be content with being behind the scenes when the real action's out front?

Don't tell me you don't have a story to tell. All geoprofessionals have stories to tell, and that, my geoprofessional reader, includes you. Consider, for example, geotechnical engineers. When I first became involved with them, in 1968 or so, geotechnical engineering (then known as soil and foundation engineering) was still wet behind the ears as professions go; just 40 years old, if that; the offspring of Karl von Terzaghi, the father of soil mechanics. As I learned more, however, I realized that what von Terzaghi did was apply science to soil mechanics, to give it far more predictability than before. And while most still regard von Terzaghi as the father of soil mechanics, the fact is that today's geotechnical engineering had generation after generation of progenitors before him. Consider primitive man, for example, living at the random whim of an inhospitable Mother Nature. The first of these human ancestors ever to have manipulated soil and rock to create shelter for a family or irrigation for their crops could likely have been the original geotechnical engineer. As the human population grew, so did its needs. And where did the process of satisfying those needs commonly begin? On or under the ground. That's a good story.

Do you realize that every wonder of the ancient world – like the pyramids of Egypt or the Colossus of Rhodes – stood

or still stands because someone somehow performed some really good geotechnical engineering? That's a good story, too.

And in today's world, every structure – every building, every rail line, every harbor, every airport – requires geotechnical engineering to pass muster. In fact, the only manmade structure not benefiting from geotechnical engineering would be the International Space Station, were it not for its dependence on launching pads. And to design those pads, geotechnical engineers, alone among all the other technical professionals, have to decipher the true attributes of natural conditions hidden by earth, rock, water, and time. That's another good story.

What about looking forward; what about looking at geotechnical engineers' roles in the future? It's exciting when you think about it, especially because climate change is already having a profound impact on our planet and is going to cause steadily more. True: How much the oceans will rise and the speed of the increase are still being debated among scientists, but even the most conservative of them are predicting catastrophe for coastal areas unless the governments involved start taking defensive measures now. A quiver of methods is being created to permit application of that combination of techniques deemed best for the area involved, including our major cities on the East, West, and Gulf Coasts. And who will be principally involved in the design of those defensive systems? You already know.

What great stories to tell... and they're *your stories*. So please don't say,

In today's world, every structure – every building, every rail line, every harbor, every airport – requires geotechnical engineering to pass muster.

"But I'm just a geotechnical engineer." Get off that *But!* You should be able to say something almost without thinking, "I'm a geotechnical engineer and *proud* of it. Let me tell you why." And the enthusiasm you have for telling your stories should overcome whatever fear you have of public speaking (you can tell one person at a time if you have to!) or of being regarded as somewhat less than professional because you believe your profession is so vitally important. Fact: If there are professionals who are more important than geoprofessionals, I don't know who they are, because not a one of them is as significantly responsible for the future well-being of mankind as a whole.

Do you *really* want to maximize your geoprofession's importance and value to the marketplace? It's not that hard to do. First, believe you are as important as you really are. Second, tell your stories so people understand why you deserve to be recognized. You don't have to brag; just explain. When you do, you'll gain the understanding and respect you need to achieve the recognized importance and value you crave... or certainly should. 

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