

Where Have All The Specifiers Gone?

By Ronald L. Geren, CSI, CCS, CCA, AIA, SCIP

In 1961, folk singer and political activist Pete Seeger along with folk singer Joe Hickerson, adapted the words of a Ukrainian folk song to the tune of an old lumberjack song to create “Where Have All The Flowers Gone?” The cyclic lyrics lead to the death of soldiers in combat, and individual recordings of the song by the Kingston Trio and Peter, Paul, and Mary made it a popular anti-war song later in the same decade. But this article isn’t about the politics of war, or even music for that matter. This article is about the apparent, and somewhat disturbing, decline in the number of experienced construction specifiers.

At the 2007 Specification Consultants in Independent Practice (SCIP) Annual Meeting just prior to the 51st Annual CSI Show and Convention, concern about the dwindling number of specification consultants was raised. A quick poll was taken by asking attendees to identify themselves within a certain age bracket. Most of the hands raised were in the 50-years-old and above categories. However, in the 35 to 49-year-old bracket, I could count the number on my hands (I include myself in that group...with a few years to spare). This disparity in numbers by age group either proves younger specifiers did not like Baltimore (the site of the meeting), or there are fewer of them entering into this professional specialty. Risking displeasure of the Maryland Office of Tourism, I wish it were the former reason; unfortunately, it appears fewer people in the design industry are making the move to construction specifier, whether as an independent consultant or as a design firm employee.

But why the decline? Why are design professionals unwilling to move into this lucrative and highly satisfying career path? The answers are out there somewhere, but all we can do at this point is speculate. And until some hard data is collected and analyzed, the following theories will have to suffice.

Theory #1: Specification writing is viewed as boring technical writing, lacking the creativity inherent in building design. What nonspecifiers fail to comprehend is that the duties of a specifier extend well beyond the traditional role of technical writer. If you are a designer, a project architect or engineer, or a project manager, who do you typically go to for solutions to those tough technical problems? More than likely it is the specifier that you turn to. In a sense, any type of problem solving can be considered a creative process.

Theory #2: Design professionals do not want to limit themselves to a specialty. Many specifiers did not start their career writing specifications. Generally, they began like most others as interns, drafting on the boards, coordinating document production, doing field observation, maybe advancing into project management, and somewhere along the way writing a few specifications. Specifiers have that well-rounded experience that gets them involved at all stages of a project--not just near the end of the construction documents phase when the specifications are usually written.

Theory #3: Specifiers do not earn the higher salaries or have the prestige that goes along with design or management. This is probably closer to being true than not. Some design firms hold their specifiers in high regard and compensate them accordingly. On the other end, some firms see the specifier’s position as a necessary evil: sucking up overhead with little in return, but “hey, we gotta have specifications--it says so in our contract.” And spread out somewhere in between lays the majority of the rest. However, the specifier can do more for the firm than just write specifications. In addition to tackling those hefty technical problems mentioned earlier, the specifier can assume many other roles, such as coordinator of in-house education and quality assurance manager. These additional duties take advantage of the specifier’s experience and knowledge and apply them to the betterment of the employees and the firm. Of course, increasing duties without an equitable increase in salary is not going to make a happier specifier.

Theory #4: The era of the specifier is coming to a close with the rise of Building Information Modeling (BIM). The key to that fallacy is the “I” in BIM: information. Although still in its infancy, BIM is increasingly being promoted as a fully integrated system of software programs, capable of generating almost everything, including drawings, construction schedules, costs estimates, and, yes, specifications. The only difference between BIM and “Pre-BIM” is the timing of information integration. In Pre-BIM, the design begins by using 2D or basic 3D drawings; but as the project moves into the later phases of design, the specifier starts his task by filling in the blanks that designers have left until near the end. However, with BIM, many of those blanks need to be filled early in the

process, otherwise a model can not be generated. Therefore, not only is the specifier still a vital part of the BIM team, but the specifier's early involvement in the project increases significantly.

There are probably other theories in addition to those mentioned above, but these are the ones that appear to be the most discussed among online discussion groups, in meetings, and in general conversations among the participants in the industry. The next step in the process is to figure out how to change the situation. How do we get people in the current generation interested in the specifying profession so that there are replacements to fill the shoes of the older generation when they retire? The answer to that question involves design professionals as well as specifiers.

For employers, make the career path attractive. This is essential. Specifiers are definitely in need, and I know this as a fact. In the past two years I've been approached by five recruiting agencies representing architectural firms and three independent specifications firms about employment. Specifiers are busy, whether they are independent or in-house, so a market exists for full-time specifiers. However, successfully hiring an experienced specifier is great for the firm, and landing that ideal specification writing position is good for the specifier, but these matches will not solve the greater problem of a specifier shortage. Specifiers need to be grown from within the industry; and in order to do that, companies need to make the position of specifier something individuals want to do. As it currently stands, an experienced person with equal interest in specification writing or another firm position will likely go the route that has the most to offer in way of salary, promotion, and recognition--and that is generally not the specification writer's position.

For specifiers, make the most of the position you are in. Do not be the codger who sits all day in the back of the office amongst shelves of catalogs and technical references. Get out and roam the office and see what is happening; mentor the interns, become indispensable as a resource during project development, be a leader in promoting quality construction documents. Once management sees value in the specifier and colleagues admire the specifier for his or her wealth of knowledge and experience, younger professionals will view the position of specifier as a respectable career path that they might consider.

For young design professionals, keep your options open. Few design professionals make it to the level of principal or owner of a design firm. For architects, even fewer attain status as a well known designer. For others, project management or a position outside of design (facility management, marketing, etc.) can be a suitable career choice. However, do not discount the specifier as a possible career move. Even if it does not suit your future goals, every design professional should spend some time writing specifications under the supervision of an experienced specifier--the successful architect or engineer is usually one with a well-rounded experience. Who knows, like "Mikey" in the cereal commercial, when you try it you might like it. And, as so many in-house specifiers have done, once they achieve that certain level of expertise, they start their own consulting businesses with great success.

What makes a good specifier? Well, the answer to that question is often debatable within the specifier community, but it can be boiled down to four general qualities:

Quality #1: *Knowledge and understanding of what construction documents are.* This can be acquired early on and throughout one's experience in the industry. The best place to start is working towards successful completion of the Construction Specifications Institute's (CSI) Construction Documents Technology (CDT) certificate exam. This certificate alone sets a solid foundation upon which one can build experience. This category includes understanding the purpose of construction drawings and specifications, being able to understand construction agreements and the roles and responsibilities of each party (legal issues), being familiar with document formats, and understanding the types and applications of the many project delivery methods.

Quality #2: *Knowledge of how things go together, how they integrate, and how they work as a system.* This can be acquired by working on the construction drawings, developing details and wall sections, as well as visiting project sites to see how buildings are really built. It is easy to specify this thing, that thing, and the other thing, but when you combine them into a building system, will they perform as they should? Will it keep water out? Will it save energy? Will it be low maintenance? Is it durable? Can the contractor build it?

Quality #3: *Technical knowledge gained through an understanding of codes and standards and from skilled research.* This can be acquired by working with the in-house or independent specifier and through continuing education. The construction industry is a developing and expanding realm. New materials, methods, and systems

are constantly being introduced; codes and standards are regularly revised and updated; and roles and responsibilities change as insurers and lawyers meddle with the risk and legal aspects of the industry. The specifier is not a database that spits out information upon request--nobody can be a specialist in all the areas that a specifier must be familiar with--but they must know *how* and *where* to find the needed information.

Quality #4: *Skill in writing and verbal communication.* For a profession that focuses on writing, understanding the mechanics of grammar and spelling words correctly are basic characteristics. Unlike drawings, the specifications need to correctly and concisely describe project requirements in written form. Verbal communication is also elemental since much of the specifier's time is spent meeting with the designers to obtain the specific information needed to prepare the specifications, and to convey to them how the drawings and specifications need to be coordinated.

Those individuals who exhibit some tendency towards these qualities should be approached with the opportunity to assume the role of a specifier. I should emphasize that not all specifiers need to be degreed architects or engineers. There is nothing mentioned in the four qualities above that indicates a degree is necessary--just a desire to learn what is necessary to perform the role, and to continue the learning process thereafter.

As the number of experienced specifiers continues to decline, the result will be deterioration in the quality of construction documents as inexperienced "specifiers" move in to fill the void. Unless design firms and other specifiers intervene and start nurturing the development of new specifiers, the final verse of that folk song--the one from which the title of this article is derived--will become very prophetic: "Oh, when will they ever learn?"

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