

From Plumbing to Dispute Resolution: Niall Lawless talks to Andy Pearson about his unusual career path

What led you to a career in building services?

My family was involved in construction and from an early age it was a career that always interested me. I believed that it offered a great sense of achievement, variety and diverse opportunities and I have found it to be so. I studied building technology at UMIST followed by postgraduate studies in building services. My first job in the industry was working as a mate to an industrial plumber; this was very worthwhile practical experience.

You have had a wide range of jobs in the industry such as design engineer, project manager, general manager and now arbitrator, adjudicator and mediation. How did this happen.

I was always interested in learning new things and having new challenges. I have had a wide range of jobs because I have worked in many different industry sectors. For example in consultancy, design and build contracting, the pharmaceutical and electronic industries and also in the IT industry promoting the concept of intelligent networked buildings.

What was the most difficult career decision you made?

When I was in my late twenties, because I wanted contract management experience I applied for and took a job with a company where my salary was to be over 25% less. The best career decision I made was to learn how to sell. Many engineers do not realise that every day they are selling their companies, themselves and their work. Unfortunately it is true that clients are often much more happy with average engineering solutions sold well than with great engineering solutions sold badly.

Has CIBSE helped you in your career?

Yes, most definitely. Becoming a Chartered Building Services Engineer was an important career milestone for me. I believe that many employers see this accreditation as your passport to increased responsibility and autonomy. Also you get a lot more out of CIBSE if you put something into it by becoming involved with the specialist groups and the regional branches in Ireland and the UK, there are also active branches in Australia and Hong Kong.

Do you see an increased over sea's role for CIBSE, for example in places like China?

Absolutely, I think China is a vast opportunity for CIBSE. CIBSE has about 18,000 members and almost 15% of these are in Hong Kong SAR. I am doing a part time PhD at a University in Beijing and every time I visit China I am amazed at the pace and scope of construction. Chinese people believe in education and as CIBSE confers an internationally recognised badge of quality there is no real reason why CIBSE does not also become prominent on the mainland.

Why did you become an arbitrator, adjudicator and mediation?

During the mid 1990's I was involved in a number of building services and building and energy management disputes where as an engineer I was providing expert opinion. In one dispute to be settled by arbitration I was providing support to the legal team and giving evidence at the hearing for almost three months. I found the experience fascinating and decided that one day I wanted to be the person who made the decision. To become a Chartered Arbitrator I studied arbitration at the College of Estate Management in Reading, and then studied for the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators fellowship exams followed by three years pupillage.

How does CIBSE support Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)?

In my opinion not very well. During the 1990's I was actively involved with CIBSE and helped bring about the merger of the then separate IT and Control Groups to form one stronger group. I was involved as member, secretary and chairman and from this know the contribution specialist groups can make. Managing conflict involving engineering services is important and I felt the creation of a CIBSE ADR group would encourage best practice in this area. Although the proposal received adequate support from CIBSE members, unfortunately the CIBSE Board saw it as a non-technical aspect of building services and did not support the setting up of an ADR Group.

Finally, I note that you are actively involved in martial arts; does this help you with your dispute resolution work?

Being fit always help with work and sometimes martial arts do help. For example last year I was involved in a racially motivated community dispute which involved a lot of anger and whereas many mediators would have felt uncomfortable perceiving a risk of harm, I did not. The dispute resolved itself.

Niall Lawless is a Chartered Arbitrator and Engineer. Visit (www.arbitrari.eu) for more details.