# Introduction to Environmental Impact Assessment Consultancy – A Graduate’s Perspective

After completing a Masters degree in Resource and Environmental Management I was faced with the inevitable question of *what environmental career path to take?* Realistically I had considered this for some time and decided to pursue a career as an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Consultant. Attractions included a varied workload, involvement in (potentially large) infrastructure projects and, of course, contributing to environmental conservation.

I was offered a place as a Graduate Environmental Consultant within the EIA and Sustainability team at Mouchel. Following the usual new job tasks, finding my way around the building, the mysteries of computer passwords, the holiday policy, and so on, it was straight into project work and getting up to speed as quickly as possible. A steep learning curve in work ethos followed, particularly in comparison to the slower paced academic world I had recently left.

There you could set your own hours of work; here, every hour was accounted for; there, deadlines were set weeks or months in advance; here, the phrase ‘by close of play’ was common; there, a single essay would be your sole focus; here, you were expected to juggle multiple reports, projects and tasks. I quickly realised that time management and efficiency were essential skills for my survival.

Aside from the above immediate differences I found moving from academic study to the professional world, there were a number of other challenges that I perhaps did not anticipate when accepting the role.

**Adapting to being a consultant** – one of the key challenges was adjusting to the consulting mindset.

As a student I had undertaken in-depth research into environmental issues with the aims of understanding environmental impacts and hopefully contributing knowledge to the environmental conservation debate. As a consultant the aim is different, although still seeking to answer environmental questions, my role is to provide a service (gathering data, analysis and assessment) and product (reports) for a client.

The basis for undertaking the environmental assessment is often driven by regulatory requirements rather than by a desire for in-depth knowledge on the environmental impact of a development and, as a result, the assessment is constrained by funding, programme, flexibility of the proposed action, and stakeholder’s interests. The client’s needs take precedent and the best possible outcome for the environment, through design or mitigation, is not always feasible. Being able to compromise ideals with constraints is an important part of the role.

**Fitting into a multi-disciplinary team** – it was clear from the start integration and constant communication with specialist environmental disciplines and the design engineers, was an essential part of the role.

While I far from expected to work in isolation, it was daunting for a new graduate to be able to understand let alone contribute ideas to technical specialists with years of experience. With this in mind, prior to my first project meeting I had decided if there was something I didn’t understand I would ask. I had heard the proverb, ‘he who asks a question is a fool for five minutes; he who does not remains a fool for life’ on my graduate induction course and was determined to apply this in my new role.

I realised five minutes into the meeting this would not be practical, the number of new acronyms and technical terms alone would have delayed the meeting well beyond lunchtime and no doubt made the new graduate very unpopular. I re-evaluated and took a more pragmatic approach, asking questions that I felt were the most important and taking notes to figure out later.

This aspect of the role has naturally been easier as I have gained more experience and technical knowledge, as well as a better understanding the EIA consultant’s role in general. A desire to learn about a wide range of environmental issues and other disciplines is definitely a benefit.
Wide range of skills – I was aware I would be required to have good technical (environmental and engineering), legal and policy knowledge to go alongside core consulting skills such as communication, people management and problem solving. However, something that surprised me is the strong emphasis on project management that goes alongside these skills. Core project management skills: planning; budgeting; and programming are all essential in my role and required on a daily basis.

Although I found many challenges during my time as a Graduate EIA Consultant, I can safely say that the aspects of the role that attracted me to the position in the first place are there – I do not have a typical work day, I have been involved in the delivery of a variety of infrastructure projects and ultimately I have contributed to environmental conservation.

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