EIA coordinators: More than a sum of their parts

Rufus Howard of Royal Haskoning argues the diversity of skills needed by environmental impact assessment (EIA) practitioners is hampering wider professional recognition

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IEMA’s recent special report, *The State of Environmental Impact Assessment* in the UK, contains an interesting section (6.6) on the role of the EIA coordinator. As well as identifying key competencies required by an EIA coordinator, it crucially recognises that the role isn’t one that another professional, such as an ecologist or civil engineer, should adopt for a project. Just as you would employ a lawyer for legal counsel, so should you employ a professional EIA practitioner to undertake an EIA.

Many individuals within organisations commissioning EIAs have now recognised the value of a using a dedicated EIA professional to lead the EIA process for their projects. However, there is still a wide range of responsibilities and titles – including manager, coordinator, practitioner and consultant.

Certain clients require EIA coordinators to lead on the contractual, financial, stakeholder, planning and health and safety, as well as the technical and environmental assessment of a project. Other clients, however, will view the EIA manager as purely responsible for the production of the environmental statement, with separate project managers, stakeholder managers, accountants, health and safety managers and technical leads.

This diversity of titles, roles and responsibilities contributes considerably to the confusion surrounding the role of an EIA professional in the minds of other professionals. I have struggled with the misconceptions and misunderstandings throughout my career, and to a certain extent, continue to do so. I recall undertaking an annual competency review with a line manager in the past, where they genuinely struggled to understand what my specialism was.
They knew I managed EIAs, but they saw that as project management demonstrating a lack of knowledge about what an EIA practitioner does and the role of project management in undertaking an EIA.

While it is true that a successful EIA coordinator needs to be a good project manager and have a high level of competency with core project management skills such as planning, budgeting, programming, quality and environmental management systems, these are just part of the required skill set. The EIA coordinator also needs, legal and policy knowledge, good technical knowledge (engineering, environmental and financial), communication and negotiation skills and, most importantly, good people management and organisational skills. Having this varied skill set, and maintaining it at a high level of competency, is a skill in itself!

The EIA coordinator is more than the sum of its parts, as by its very nature it requires a person to be able to understand, coordinate and manage the competing elements of a project and successfully combine all these elements into a cohesive and environmentally sustainable project. Looking at the required competencies listed on EIA consultant recruitment adverts quickly reveals the number and variety of competencies required for an EIA role. The chart below shows the competencies most frequently asked for in a random sample of just 15 EIA recruitment adverts.

This requirement for proficiency in multiple skills often leads to the description of “generalist”, with which I strongly disagree. It evokes the image of “jack of all trades and master of none”, which couldn’t be further from the truth. Naturally, with such a wide range of required competencies, individual EIA coordinators will have different strengths.
Unfortunately, the range of different skills and strengths of EIA practitioners adds further to the uncertain perception of the role held by other professionals.

The EIA coordinator role is clearly sufficiently complex and specialised to require its own profession. The difficulty the EIA profession is facing is one of identity and recognition. IEMA have made an excellent start at standardising and recognising professional standards within EIA through the creation of the **EIA Practitioner Register** and the **EIA Quality Mark** and I urge EIA professionals to participate in these initiatives.

However, when compared to the institutions and standardisation within much older, established professions, such as engineering, law and planning, we are still in our relative infancy and these IEMA initiatives need time to grow and mature to aid the development of the profession.

Until the title, role and responsibilities of EIA coordinators is standardised across the industry, we will never attain the same recognition, respect and remuneration that is routinely afforded to the architects, planners, accountants, lawyers and engineers we work with on a daily basis.

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This article was written as a contribution to the **EIA Quality Mark**’s commitment to improving EIA practice.

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