

# The view from down under

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## Craig MacDonald describes the challenges and obstacles to working as a building surveyor in Australia

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What is a building surveyor? If you are one of the 8,500 in the UK who proudly belong to the [RICS Building Surveying Professional Group](#), the only people who might ask you this question are those who work outside the construction industry. However, the remaining 842 surveyors of the same group located elsewhere in the world are probably all too familiar with having to answer. That is unless you have already changed your title and stopped waving your flag.

I recently relocated to pursue opportunities in Australia. My search for employment became more than just looking for a job; it became a crash course on how to market myself correctly in a new country.

### Australian building surveyors

I learned before I arrived that the role of building surveyor in Australia reflects more closely with that of a UK building control surveyor. Their core skills are focused around statutory compliance and their employers are local authorities. Some of their duties include signing off proposed plans that meet the requirements of [Building Code of Australia](#) and inspecting the 'rate payers' swimming pool for compliance issues. What I did not know, however, was that they do not get involved in managing projects or administering contracts at all. They are not synonymous with building pathology and building reports ? building surveyors of the type defined by RICS.

This was my first obstacle. After some tweaking of my CV (now resume) I secured my first interview with a local authority for a building surveying position. I walked away quietly wondering: "Have I just interviewed for the right job?" Eventually finding the definition given by the [Australian Institute of Building Surveyors](#), it appeared I had not, and certainly not the job I was initially looking for.

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I then had to ask myself: "Should I be taking anything I can get?" Without getting on top of this quickly the consequences included being unhappy in the wrong job, unwittingly taking my career in a different direction or even having to return to the UK (I'm not ready for that yet). But clearly, I am not the first chartered building surveyor to have got off the boat looking for the 'promised land'; I needed to find others and ask them how they did it.

My first stop was LinkedIn. But before putting out feelers, my profile had to be up to scratch to show searchers what I was all about. I saw this as a good opportunity to wave my building surveyor flag. RICS and being 'Chartered' are not widely understood in Australia so I used my profile as a platform to promote these too. I also started to join relevant groups, including [RICS Oceania](#).

I created a topic explaining my situation and invited others to share their experiences. I asked: "Should I be calling myself a building surveyor?" This is when things began to turn around. I was invited to networking events and was contacted by other chartered building surveyors with their own stories and advice. With their help, I began to identify my new name in Australia: construction project manager.

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I began to build a new network of professionals from whom to seek advice, and from this exposure, I was attracting the right kind of attention from recruiters on LinkedIn. When used correctly, LinkedIn turned into a powerful personal marketing tool (who knew?). I started typing 'project manager' into job searches instead of 'building surveyor'. The job descriptions returned were very similar to the work streams I was involved in as a building surveyor in the UK. Now I was getting somewhere.

## **Local experience**

It still was not good enough. My second obstacle was my lack of local experience. It did not matter that I had 7 years' experience in exactly what the job description required; none of that experience was in Australia. And to rub salt into the wound, the value of being chartered was not as apparent to Australian employers as I had hoped, some having no knowledge of RICS. Recruiters were putting me forward for junior or near irrelevant roles, arguing that it was my best chance to gain local experience. I took my frustration to RICS Oceania and it turned out to be a good move.

I acquired a shortlist of members and fellows employed by well-known worldwide organisations who were known to hire chartered building surveyors in Australia. Being members themselves, they understood the skillset and how to apply it within the Australian market. As it turned out though, most of them had changed their titles too.

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Those who were once building surveyors were now disguised as facilities managers, project managers or building consultants, all of them executing duties undertaken by building surveyors and many happily accepting their new name along with their new lifestyle. I diligently contacted each of them and after a month of chasing the leads and securing a few interviews, I finally found myself in the enviable position of having 2 job

offers on the table (albeit 5,800km away from where I began my search in Perth: obstacle number 3). One was as a project manager for a large organisation and another as a building consultant for an Australian-based consultancy run by RICS members originally from the UK.

## Chameleons

If you ask me what I currently do, I will tell you that I am a project manager. If you ask me what I am, I will wave my building surveyor flag. Outside the UK, building surveyors appear to have become the chameleons of the construction industry. The skills we offer are in demand all over the world, especially in emerging markets such as China, India and Brazil, demonstrated by the balance of members inside and outside the UK. In addition, there are now many more overseas candidates enrolled on the building surveying pathway for their [Assessment of Professional Competence](#), which will inevitably shift that balance.

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So why do we still have to re-market our image to reflect what is required by the role sought? Perhaps the role is traditionally narrow focused in particular countries. It is not understood that a building surveyor can use their skillset in much a wider remit, reaping further rewards for themselves and their employer. However, to take advantage of this, it is likely that employers will have to address insufficient professional indemnity insurance or lack of region-specific licensing or membership. And so the obstacles continue to stack up.

These were some of my personal obstacles. As an organisation, RICS continues to tackle similar obstacles on a much grander scale against existing incentives, agendas, practices and ethical values. In the face of this, do we have to redefine what a building surveyor is or change our title entirely? How do we define RICS' widest area of surveying practice in such a way that it evokes a core skillset that attracts the right attention from both employers and clients all over the world? It may seem like a daunting proposal, but for now, I will keep waving my flag.

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