

Key Considerations when Selecting a Locate Service Provider

By: Kevin Vine

The emergence of new regulations, awareness campaigns and best practices across Canada has thrust the topic of Damage Prevention to the forefront of conversations around construction safety. Excavation remains one of the riskiest construction activities, and in 2016, an estimated \$975 million was spent across Canada on societal costs related to damage to underground plant.

To protect underground plant, infrastructure owners are now opting to outsource the work involved with locating their buried assets to trained and qualified Locate Service Providers (LSPs). This strategy makes sense from both a cost and safety perspective: utility locating is a complex and time consuming task that involves many aspects from managing ticket requests, to implementing a 360 degree feedback process, to following an escalation protocol in cases of emergency.

When seeking to secure an LSP, whether through a Request for Qualification (RFQ) or an informal process, there are several key markers to look out for. Enlisting the services of an underqualified or inexperienced LSP could actually increase the likeliness of damages, injury and liability. Here are a few key selection criteria to keep in mind.

Make sure that Health & Safety is at the forefront

Above all else, ensure the selected LSP follows a robust Health, Safety & Environmental (HS&E) Management System that incorporates, at a minimum, principles of the Occupational Safety & Health Act, applicable general safety practices, a hazard identification and reporting mechanism and an injury/incident investigation process. Look for a commitment to Environmental Management: Does the LSP safely dispose of hazardous material? Is a re-use and recycling program in place? How are spills prevented and managed? The HS&E Management System should be regularly updated and implemented by an active Joint, Health & Safety Committee (JH&S).

Furthermore, ensure the LSP carries out regular workplace safety audits. Ask who is in charge of the audits, how often they occur and how the audit results are documented and incorporated into policies, practices and procedures. To further reduce risk, look for a company that is certified by an outside organization such as Avetta or ISNetworld. These organizations screen contractors to ensure compliance with current regulations.

Ask for proof of a commitment to quality

A professional, experienced LSP should demonstrate a firm dedication to quality. A Quality Management System (QMS) should underpin every process, from the initial project site visit through to submitting the final client deliverable. When assessing an LSP, ask to view a copy of the QMS. Make sure it outlines processes for records/data management, document control, inspections and testing, sustainability and corrective/preventative actions. It should highlight clear roles and responsibilities, and the organization should staff dedicated quality personnel such as a Quality Engineer to oversee the Quality Management process.

Look for an investment in continuous training

Utility locating methodology is always evolving and new regulations are frequently introduced. Field Technicians should receive regular technical training on geophysical equipment and best practices for locating and marking utilities. Technicians should also be trained to adjust locating

and marking techniques based on site conditions such as rain, snow, vegetation, construction, and traffic.

A commitment to Health & Safety training is also a must. Certifications to look out for include WHMIS, First Aid, Working at Heights, Confined Space Entry (CSE), and Damage Prevention Technician (DPT) training, just to name a few.

Much of the work involved with utility locating occurs in the office, not just the field. Utility locate requests need to be reviewed against a number of factors, including proximity of utilities to the excavation area, clarity of excavation requests, accuracy of measurements and offsets, and the location of high risk assets such as gas lines or hospitals. Check to ensure the LSP has the resources in place to manage this aspect of utility locating.

Gather information about previous experience

A little bit of research will go a long way towards selecting an LSP that is qualified, experienced and equipped to manage your project. Find out how many years the company has been in business and look for experience completing projects similar to yours. For example, does the LSP have knowledge of local conditions? Have they worked on projects of a comparable size and scope? Secure contact information for at least three references to verify that the projects were completed safely and successfully.

Ensure a project plan is in place to forecast workload fluctuations and adjust resources accordingly. A responsive plan should be developed for dealing with unpredictable fluctuations. This is key to confirming tickets are processed in a timely manner and that unnecessary delays aren't introduced into the project.

Investigate the methodology and locating approach

Look for an LSP that can offer more than basic locating capabilities and is experienced in leveraging a variety of geophysical instrumentation and methods. In instances where a tracer wire has broken or is missing, or there are buried utilities comprised of concrete or PVC material, basic utility locating equipment will not detect the utility. In these cases, more advanced technologies such as Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) may be required. It is helpful to work with an LSP that can swap in other technologies and be flexible to navigate challenges and surprises as they arise.

Ensure the LSP begins the locating process with a visual inspection to identify access points and potential hazards, and that plant facilities shown on available records match those on site. This is especially critical on project sites where new construction has occurred or is in progress. Evidence of buried infrastructure might include poles, dips, enclosures, pedestals, valves, meters and manholes.

Furthermore, confirm the LSP has a documented damage investigation procedure in place. If a damage does occur throughout the course of locating, whether due to technician error or other circumstance, the LSP should investigate the damage to determine the root cause and any additional factors that may have contributed to the damage. There should also be a formal process in place for documenting and communicating the findings of the investigation.

A final thought

Choosing to outsource utility locates is a decision heavily weighted in risk management. By keeping key selection criteria in mind, infrastructure owners can confidently transfer the responsibility to an expert, qualified LSP that will minimize potential hazards, complete work safely and ensure compliance with regulations and requirements.

For more information on Damage Prevention, a number of resources are available on the Canadian Common Ground Alliance , Ontario Regional Common Ground Alliance, and Dig Safe websites.

Locate Service Provider Checklist:

- 1.Does the LSP implement a robust Health, Safety & Environment Plan that is regularly updated?
- 2.Is a Quality Management System (QMS) in place that is overseen by quality personnel?
- 3.Do staff members receive regular training and is a competency assessment program in place?
- 4.Has the LSP successfully completed projects of a similar size and scope?
- 5.Does the LSP have a history of satisfying response times, and is a sound resourcing strategy in place?
- 6.Does the LSP have experience working with one call centres, managing locate requests and utilizing the 360 Degree Feedback Process?
- 7.Is the LSP trained to employ a variety of locating tools and techniques such as Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR)?
- 8.Is there a site Hazard Analysis and Damage Investigation procedure in place?

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