

## COLLABORATING TO OVERCOME COVID-19 LOCATE CHALLENGES

With the anticipation of government restrictions soon being relaxed as cases of COVID-19 begin to decline, there is apprehension among Locate Service Providers (LSP) on what the industry is going to look like over the next few months. There are fears that once restrictions are loosened, every contractor in the province will be requesting a spring season's worth of locates over a matter of weeks.

Spring volumes have been steady in 2020, but the current March volumes are between 35-50% lower than March 2019. After a difficult 2019 season that was jammed with high ticket volumes that led to LSPs scrambling to manage late locates and contractor expectations, our industry has to work together to overcome our challenges by sharing best practices between LSPs and communicating and collaborating with contractors and project owners.

### PREPARING LSP TEAMS AMID COVID CHALLENGES

Using previous seasons' data, LSP companies are challenged to estimate locate volumes and hire accordingly for every new season. This season's slow commencement and social distancing guidelines have made it difficult to follow regular hiring timelines and provide training for new employees. This is not a typical construction season, there is no precedent - no previous data to refer to, making it even more difficult for LSPs to estimate work volumes and hire accordingly.

Additional challenges reside with proper training for the new hires that have been brought on. Hands on training becomes difficult with the need for social distancing between the teacher and the pupil. Shifting training to online classrooms has the benefits of sharing knowledge, but hands-on training is essential for the locator. Creating thorough training programs that provide instruction and hands-on in a short timeframe has been a feat in itself for LSPs.

### TIPS FOR LSPs TO MANAGE WORKLOADS

Once the initial challenges of workforce and training are overcome, additional steps can be taken by LSP organizations to manage heavy workloads. LSPs spend a significant amount of time in the vehicle driving from one site to the next, there can be impressive time savings achieved if organizations invest more into efficient route planning.

Resource planning is also essential, if there are work areas that are underutilized, organizations need to look to relocate LSP resources to aid in tackling workloads. Large locating projects can also be completed in phases by performing a first round of locates to get contractors started, then returning in phases to keep the project going rather than completing the entire project at once and leaving other demanding locates in the queue. Once efficiencies are achieved for LSPs, this leaves fewer options to manage locate volumes and requires more coordination with contractors and project owners to overcome workload hurdles.

### WORKING TOGETHER WITH CONTRACTORS AND PROJECT OWNERS TO MANAGE WORKLOADS

When contractors or project owners collaborate with LSPs, this can significantly aid in ensuring locate timelines are met. Providing clear documentation and information (e.g: a pdf vs. a hand drawing) to Ontario OneCall to ensure LSPs know what the contractor is looking for, or even having the contractor directly reach out to the LSP can help to identify needs as well as discuss possible timelines.

One of the key things contractors can do is meet with the LSP so that everyone is on the same page in regards to requirements, deadlines and expectations. Contractors that walk the site and spend time talking through site concerns

with an LSP aid in expediting a project. When a contractor isn't available for a walk-thru, they can visit the site and "white-line" areas where they actually need to dig, this can also allow locators to complete projects much more quickly.

During this pandemic, there has been a reinforced message of "only taking what you need", this is the same with locate requests. Contractors who know what they need and don't request areas that they "might" need, better utilize LSP resources. As part of a locate, LSPs integrate extra space around dig sites for additional safety, so there is no need for contractors to add on extra meters to their requests to provide safety buffers. When contractors only order what they plan to dig, rather than the entire site, this saves LSPs time and they're able to complete more locates.

Currently there are no restrictions on the number of locates that can be submitted at once, this can lead to contractors submitting all their project locates at once. When large lists of locates are received, the submitter needs to go through their list and assign priority to the locates. Otherwise, if lists of projects are not prioritized, LSPs choose based on efficient routing; running the risk that the most important projects don't get the attention they require in a timely manner.

Owners of large scale projects can also reach out to LSPs in advance to provide forewarning. Advance notice allows LSPs to staff-plan and schedule resources. Another option for large scale projects is looking into a Dedicated Locator Program, a small investment integrated into project plans can ensure capacity to perform locates on time. Owners interested in this option can follow up with their LSP, utility owners, or Ontario OneCall to learn more.

Throughout this pandemic there's been a lot of comments about, "we're all in this together", in reality we've always been in this locating business together. LSPs, contractors and project owners, we all succeed together by working together. Communication and collaboration is essential to overcome the potentially high locate volumes and labour shortages that are expected once our communities start healing and returning to a new normal.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Meyer is the Director of Operations, Locates, at GTel. GTel is one of the largest utility locate providers in Ontario. Headquartered in London, ON, with over 500 employees, GTel specializes in providing utility locating and energy services to clients of all sizes.