

PLANET UNDERGROUND.TV **THE ROUNDTABLE** Transcript
2017 REVIEW

Kent Kowalske—Supervising Engineer, Ameren Illinois
Tom Stutzman—SSG Work Manager, ComEd
Tim Pfleeger—Vice President, Electric Conduit Construction



Here is a full transcript of one of our Roundtables with Kent Kowalske from Ameren, Tom Stutzman from ComEd and Tim Pfleeger from Electric Conduit Construction. The goal was to put a facility owner, with a utility manager and former excavator, with a utility contractor, and see where they went with it! The kickoff question to get them started brought up the topic of bringing locating into the contracting world to verify one-call marks, and looking at the potential benefits and cost savings for their companies. As you are about to read, this question sent our panelists off on in-depth discussions and debates on a wide-range of hot-button industry topics!

Why is it economical for excavators to empower themselves to use locators, and train their crews how to use locators, rather than to just rely on one-call marks?

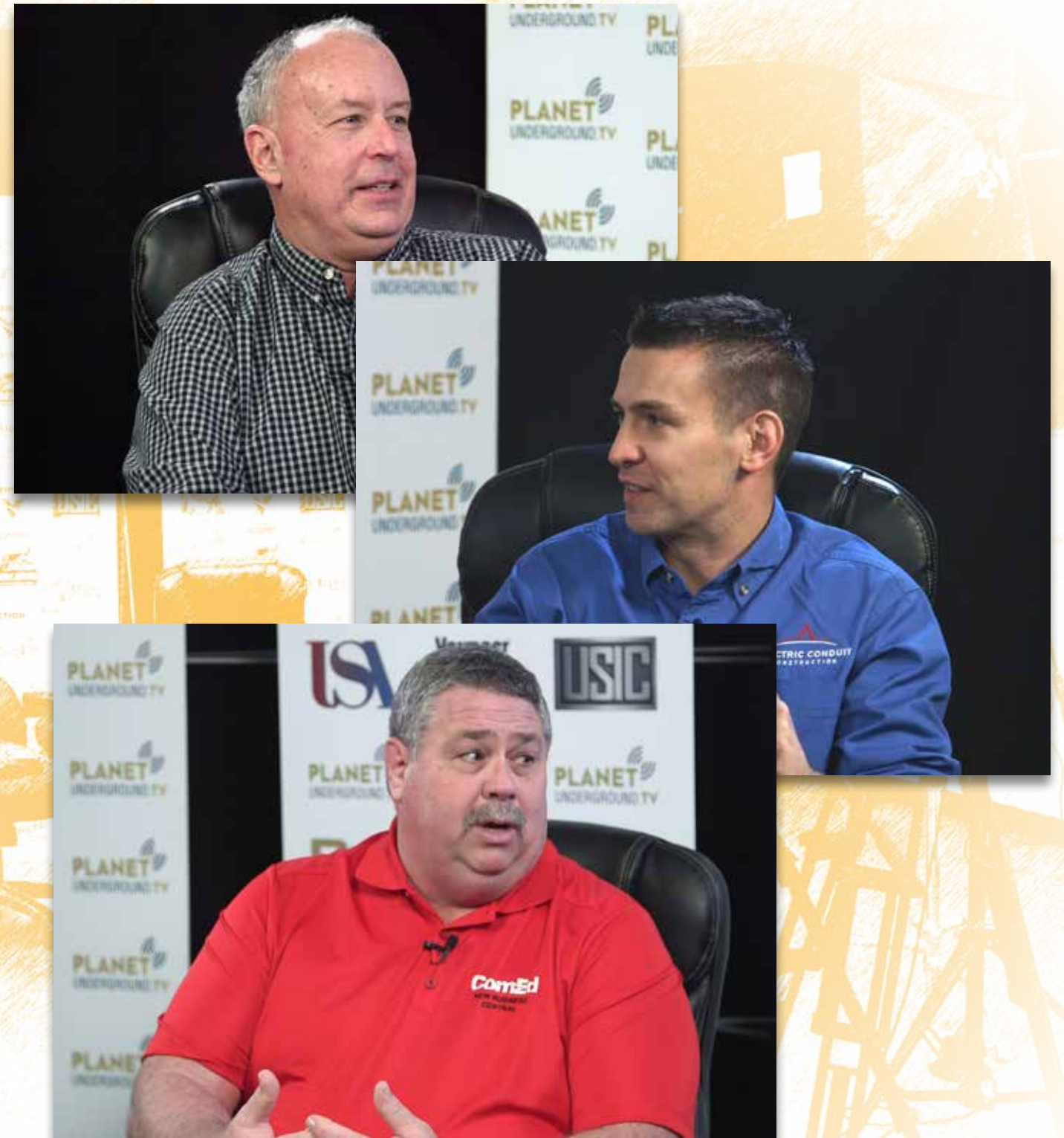
Tom:

The economic value of this is downtime, that is what I found when I was working as a contractor. What we did was buy locating devices for our crews, and we were very clear to them: you're not out here to locate, you're

here to verify. So what we mandated our crews to do was to take a locating device and sweep the area that we were going to be drilling in prior to putting in a drill rod. What we were really looking for was verifying the marks, and whether we needed to pothole or not. We had a rule that you stayed 24 inches away from a mark, so if you were scanning an area that was 18 to 36 inches outside of that zone, and you weren't getting any anomalies, we would use that as verification that we could drill. The other piece that we mandated our folks to do, was that over a certain length, 25 to 50 feet or so, we would pothole an existing mark to see if their marks were good. So if we're digging where they're saying it is, but we're finding they are 12 to 14 inches off, our trust value drops. But it reduced our downtime quite significantly, because any time you hit a line, it's got potential for injury and all the lost time that goes with it.

Tim:

We do similar things because we do a lot of directional drilling as well, and we have set up a process so that when guys get out to a site, we give them locating equipment. The main philosophy behind it is that you are out there watching and verifying what's in the ground. And it's difficult, because as a company, we are starting to grow and expand, and on the one side we have this core group of guys that have been with us for twenty years. They've been out so many times, they can almost feel when there's a missing mark



Top: Kent Kowalske, Supervising Engineer - Ameren Illinois
Center: Tim Pfleeger, Vice President - Electric Conduit Construction
Bottom: Tom Stutzman, SSG Work Manager - ComEd



somewhere. They have this sense, they've dug so many holes and put so much pipe in the ground, that they know when something's not right. So it's hard when you get these new, inexperienced people in there to give them that sense. Giving them a book, or even a piece of locating equipment by itself, isn't going to be a 100% fix. So it's about getting them with the right people and giving them enough time up front to understand that you could go a whole day and not even pull out your drill. And it's expensive, but if it saves you from hitting one of those services, then that's a good thing. I think there's a dual approach to it, you can give them the locating equipment to verify, but not to be experts or anything. You want them to go through the whole JULIE process, and not suddenly think they're a private locator.

Kent:

That's an issue too, you have to make sure you have some protection with the JULIE process. We tell our guys too, we do the verification as well, and a lot of our guys used to locate when we did the locates in house. We've lost a little bit of that ability over the last few years, but do still try to maintain equipment with the crews. You really have to be careful, don't assume you have something unless it has a JULIE mark. Our directional boring crews probably have the most valuable contact list, with the number of every locator in the area that they can call directly.

Tom:

And I think it's money well spent to educate those new guys that you're talking about. For those 20-year guys, the reason they get that feeling is

because something doesn't look right. So getting them educated on what the system should look like is big too. When I left the contracting world and came over to the utility world, it was a big learning curve for me that our construction people didn't know how a gas system ran, or how a phone system ran. They worked around it every single day, but didn't really understand it. We looked to our training department to start adding that piece in there. When you're looking at something, and there's not a mark on the ground but there's houses there with gas meters, someone needs to raise their hand and say something.

Tim:

It gives them some sense of not just the marks on the ground, but the overall context of those marks within the utility system. They can then understand, there's a main here, there should be services coming off, or here's a telecommunications pedestal, there should be a mark coming off it. From my sense as well, and I think this is an issue in the construction industry, it seems like in my father's generation there were people who wanted to get into these trades as a skilled profession. But the turnover rate that I see in the younger generation is almost like a stopgap. They have nothing else, so they get into the construction world, and because of that, the level and depth of experience that people have is much more shallow today. I know I sound like an old guy (laughter) but it's true, and it's hard because the guys that have been with us for 20 years, they don't have much time left. The value that these guys bring, especially to directional drilling, is scary to think about what happens when those guys are gone. They save you so much money from not hitting things, and from finding ways of getting pipe in the ground in tight situations.

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Kent:

Actually, we've been hiring a lot of apprentices over the last few years, with all the people we have retiring. A lot of these apprentices have been coming from local directional drilling companies that have had good experience, and that's been a real boon for us, to get these experienced people and then you start to teach them the business.

Tim:

That is a good thing, because it's getting harder everyday to put stuff in the ground.

Kent:

And it's harder for the local companies, because we're taking their good people!

Tom:

Yeah, the stealing resources part becomes a bidding war for that 20-year guy with experience. But you're right, the new people coming in today just feels like a stopgap for them, saying this isn't my chosen career path. You really need to break that down so they understand that this can't be a stopgap, this is too dangerous to not take this as a serious endeavor, this really is gonna be my career.

Tim:

It's a skilled profession, and especially in Chicago where the wages allow you to support your family, you should take the time to continue your education and expand your knowledge base.

Tom:

And not just be there to collect a paycheck.

Tim:

Correct, it's a difficult thing that I see. Getting people in who have experience, and getting the new people experience, it's difficult.

Tom:

I brought some of that knowledge that I had as a contractor over to ComEd, and it was an uphill battle, a difficult conversation. I was fighting the union mentality of "that's not my job, that's someone else's job", so we sold this whole concept of locating and doing pre-locates, as, you're not locating, you're verifying. It was really a long discussion between our labor and the union, that this is what we're asking them to do, but we're not holding anyone accountable because you're not locating. But what is does is get everyone in tune with thinking safe before I start digging.

Tim:

So is that a new process that you guys have implemented fairly recently?

Tom:

When the law changed back in 2004-2005, things got serious about hitting other utilities, so we brought that in. There's still some resistance in it, because there's still some ex-locators out there with the mentality of "that's their job, I won't be doing this". But it changes once you can show them the benefits of no injuries, getting the jobs done, and things like that. I work in new business, with few conflicts in the ground, but recently we've had some damages so we're talking about putting some locators in with our trenching groups. We're having them walk out and just see if there's an anomaly, just see if something is there.

Tim:

Have you been able to quantify the savings at all, in terms of damages?

Tom:

I haven't looked at it, I just know.

Tim:

Subjectively, you know it's working.

"...the new people coming in today, it just feels like a stopgap for them. You really need to break that down so they understand that this can't be a stopgap, this is too dangerous to not take this as a serious endeavor..."

-Tom Stutzman

Tom:

I was charged with bringing directional boring back in house at ComEd, and when we started it back up again, that was some of the stuff we talked about. There was nobody at ComEd that had that experience, and we weren't getting a lot of people volunteering to get into the department, so it allowed me to go to the street, where I bought my talent. So I'm bringing people in, like you said Kent, we're stealing from the contractors, and getting those 15-20 year experienced guys. It was the best thing we ever did, even if I only got 10 of those people, that knowledge gets spread out amongst the new people.

Kent:

We did it a little differently, we bought a unit, the first in our division, and had three sets of crews that would run it. One crew would run it for a month, and then we would rotate it to the next one, so we built that ability in-house, which has been really valuable for us. Something that changed several years ago, was that we used to not charge each other. So if the water company hit us, or we hit them, we wouldn't charge each other for it. It seems like when we changed that, everyone got a little more careful.

Tim:

It just reiterates, when they get that bill, it says we need to take this more seriously. If you just wash it under the table, it doesn't bring those problems to light.

Tom:

(to Kent): I'm with you on that, we stopped trading damages, with the gas company and the phone company and all these other ones, and a lot of it had to do with the labor rates, and the things people started looking at. They said, wait a minute, it cost me a lot more money to fix your stuff than it did mine, why are we still trading these things?

Tim:

For us, it becomes hard because when we work for a customer, it becomes an event. So if we're working for ComEd and we hit something, we know it, and even if it costs three extra days to get past something, you do it. We do a lot of telecom work, where that incentive isn't there from the customer. Their infrastructure isn't as safety-sensitive as a gas company, so that incentive



and that push has to come from us internally. That's difficult, because even among your competitors, that push might not be there. That's where we see the biggest problem in the telecom work, because you don't have inspectors on sight, you don't have company representatives talking about hitting utilities. So, to keep that message up, while at the same time pushing production, it's a fine line.

Kent:

Do they say, just tell me when you're done and give me a map?

Tim:

Yeah, I don't want to say they don't care, it's just a different atmosphere.

Tom:

We have very specific rules for our contractors that they have to follow. I was part of the group that wrote the ComEd Rules to Dig By (see next page for excerpt), and these rules were really nothing more than the state law in writing. And this was a big problem, because before this was all instituted, our folks would ask, why do I need to call in for locates, when I've already located my line? That's what I'm repairing. In their mind, they didn't need locates, because their stuff is already located. So that was a huge change because now they were being held accountable to call in for locates and go through the process.

Kent:

And sit for two hours.

Tom:

Yeah, sit for two hours, and get everyone to understand what the laws are there for. Honestly, I can't quantify it, but I know that our downtime has been reduced dramatically now that we're taking these steps to make sure. Because if I can identify something that is a problem, I can either change my running line, or I can get someone out there to verify it and dig it up before I get to it and hit it. Whether it's marked or not, and you hit something, down is down.

Tim:

From a private contractor standpoint, for the economics of it, I find we're pushing two things at the same time. Sometimes in a field employee's

mind are two competing interests, one says you should be able to do this much in a day, and the other says that you should be safe and follow all these rules. I see a lot of companies out there where they give them two separate buckets: here's these rules, and I need you to get 500 feet today. They don't intertwine the processes, they need to understand that if you work safe and develop a process and

pre-plan, then you can get production at the same time.

Tom:

It actually sometimes gets put into three buckets, right? You have the safety piece of it, you have the production piece of it, and then you have that piece that says, what happens if the project goes sideways? You have to figure out how to get the two of them to cross, and then say this piece here is the amount of time I have to spend to be safe and productive at the same time.

Tim:

I've heard guys when they hit something, say, "I'm being pushed, I'm being pushed". Well, that's not what we're saying, though that delivery is difficult from our end. (To Tom): Is it the same for you guys? How much is production being scrutinized from the utility standpoint? I would imagine less.

Tom:

A lot less, yes.

Kent:

The same with us, yes.

Tom:

It's more about need dates, when a customer needs this, can we get it to them. So what you take on the productivity side, we take more on the safety side. But having said that, my work group is always compared against the contractors. So if the contractors can come in and do it cheaper, why



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wouldn't I have them come in and do it? We have to keep pace, we track that and document that stuff, we know that it's there.

Kent:

One of the things we made sure about too is that safety is more important than production and getting that into people's minds has taken awhile. We also hold our contractors to the same rules that we hold our people to, we try to keep it at a level playing field. On one side or the other, people can't be taking shortcuts, it sends a bad message if we say, we have to do this, but they don't. And I think we've gotten it across to our folks when we say, if you need to take a step back, then take a step back. You may have to come back tomorrow, but that's fine if you're going to do it safely.

Tim:

Yeah, it's the long-term goal, and one of the things that my father was big on was, this company is not just this one project, it's trying to survive the next 15-20 years down the road. If you look at it like, we can't lose money on this project, you're going to be out of business, because you'll end up doing things that don't promote your long-term strategy which is being safe.

★ "There's digging, and then there's efficient digging, which I've figured out are two different things." -Kent Kowalske

Tom:

Once you nod your head to allow someone to do something that's a little bit unsafe, you've just kicked the door open.

Tim:

You've thrown everything out the window, it's done.

Kent:

(To Tim): That's a perfect example for us, and probably for you too, we've gotten a lot better on knowing what to do.

Tim:

If you say, go ahead this one time, that permeates and gets out there.

Tom:

That's good, because if you set a rule and don't let anyone cross that line, it becomes a business practice.

Tim:

It takes the pressure off them to have to make that decision.

Kent:

That's really been important too for good locating marks and good records on our part, because a lot of times we can plan that out and have that box

there ahead of time. If they know that they've got a tricky corner here where they might have to dig first, or get the shoring out, that can save you a lot of time.

Tom:

With some of the equipment that's available now, back when I first started there was no vacuum excavation. Now, people will argue about how expensive things like vacuum excavation are, well, have one back injury and tell me, did that pay for it?

Tim:

Right, and it's not a bad thing, but I've recognized that hand-digging is a lost art. Back in the day, you could dig twenty test holes with a shovel, but now you can see that vacuum excavation has become a more prominent method. They might go out and dig four holes, not because they're lazy, but just because they don't know how to do it.

Kent:

(laughter) There's digging, and then there's efficient digging, which I've figured out are two different things.

Tom:

Absolutely!

Tim:

When I first started out, the first crew I was on, I was 18 years old and I remember watching the foreman dig with a shovel and he was like a mini-excavator with boots. I would rather have him than a piece of excavating equipment. But that's gone now, and I think because of injuries and locating issues, we tend to veer towards vacuum excavation now.

Tom:

To your point, when I was a contractor, we did spend half a day or so on digging and the right way to dig. I had a guy, he was a laborer before he came to us, he would sharpen his shovel every day and it was his, no one else could use it. You would look at his walls, and they were like glass, straight up and down with flat bottoms, and he could do it in the half the time anyone else could. People would ask him, how do you do this, and it's all technique.

Tim:

It's all technique, it's a skilled profession for sure. We've started using the trailer vacuums, which is good for drill crews because they're portable. We don't have to sub some of this stuff out now, and they've been helpful with potholing. We've gotten to the point where we have a process down, and depending how big the job is, that first day out there you are potholing and getting your running line down.

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