Guiding yourself through the professional world can be difficult when you don’t know where to start or what tools to use. Does networking still matter when you’ve already landed the job? How do you build a reputation and what should you do if it all goes downhill? We took the time to interview Pete Ritchey and Roberto Ruiz-Salas of Kimley-Horn to talk about their careers and how they’ve transformed their reputation within the civil engineering community throughout the years.

Pete is approaching 20 years in the civil engineering industry faster than he’d like to admit. For much of his career, his focus has been split between public and private projects throughout Southern California. Pete’s broad resume includes sidewalk improvements in Del Mar, 50+-acre commercial centers in Riverside, an employee parking structure at Legoland, and the award-winning Waterfront Park in San Diego. Pete is experienced with design of multi-modal networks, accessibility guidelines for both public and private spaces, and stormwater treatment methods for a wide range of developed sites. Pete is an avid soccer fan and still plays when he’s not building Legos or biking with his four-year-old son.

Roberto is a Civil Engineer with more than 10 years of experience in roadway, urbanization, and infrastructure design. He has provided engineering and environmental services for numerous projects specializing in roadway, bicycle facilities, municipal parks, H&H, site grading, and utility design. In addition to Engineering, he is focused in the business development aspect of being a consultant and developing younger staff.
You’re at work and a small package arrives for you: a little box containing your first set of business cards. It’s a few years until you see the letters “PE” at the end of your name and you’re looking forward to owning that stamp. It’s official, this is the beginning of your professional career. You’ll be passing out these business cards at professional events, conferences and client meetings. How do you build an industry reputation? What will people remember about you when they look back at your card?

Industry reputation begins and develops through networking – but it’s not about how many business cards you can collect, it’s about the impressions you make on others and the relationships you are able to grow. Anyone can prove themselves technically, it is being personable and approachable that leads to people wanting to work with you. Forming meaningful relationships with colleagues, peers, and clients is important, but can come with growing pains.

There are going to be awkward conversations, times when you can’t make it past the “small talk”, feeling like you don’t know anyone in the room, etc. While these feelings are deeply visceral in this stage in our careers, relationships take time to build meaning and trust just like your industry reputations, and we all start from ground zero. So, how do you “network” and start those relationships? Here are some key tips and reminders that Pete and Roberto shared with us to help us spark relationships and our reputations:

1. “You’re not that important.” Don’t stress over the awkward thing you might have said because no one’s going to remember it. Take a second to think, can you think of the last time someone said something awkward? Do you even remember who it was?

2. Approach conversation from the personal side, especially if your experience level makes you feel insecure. It’s easy to feel intimidated when talking about pavement with someone who has twenty years of experience designing roadways. But if you start talking about life, hobbies, and general interests instead, the feeling of intimidation disappears.

3. Confidence builders, like asking a question at the end of a presentation or approaching people you’ve met before, will help you become more comfortable in a networking space and help others remember you.

4. Connect with people – your peers from school are growing with you and will be working in the industry alongside you. Pete mentioned that he’s still doing business with people he met in his masters program a decade ago and that even a few relationships make a difference. Stay connected - giving someone a call or sending someone a message on LinkedIn once a year is extremely doable and memorable. No one gets mad at people for reaching out.
As a student, there were times where it felt like a competition between us and our peers. We compete for the top grade, the winning group project, the internship, and even over the best concrete canoes. As a professional, it'll feel natural to compare yourself to your peers. Don't. The comparison game will only add stress and pressure to your life. Your energy is better spent building the person next to you and sharing ideas on how to progress the industry forward positively. Instead of comparing yourself to others, seek to build others. Your peers will begin to recognize you as someone who's always willing to share big ideas, engage in productive conversation, and encourage their colleagues.

Roberto said it best: “People will receive different opportunities in life, just take your opportunities, and do your best in them.”

A common feeling amongst young professionals is the fear of making mistakes. Roberto's insight was that when it comes to design, everyone, no matter how many years of experience, is going to make mistakes. While it's always important to try to catch our mistakes ahead of time, mistakes are inevitable. What stood out while talking to both Pete and Roberto was that maintaining your reputation is done by owning up to your mistakes as well as fixing them. While this seems obvious, many times they've seen their colleague's reputations crumble by trying to deflect blame on others. Instead, the way to strengthen your reputation is to not only admit to mistakes but be the one to guide everyone out of the muck. Be the person who fixes the problems. That's how you'll be remembered.

One of the most insightful points of our interview was Pete's comment that we need to remember, "It's a long career." Reputations are not built overnight. Both Pete and Roberto stressed the importance of putting the time and effort into building future relationships. Not every conversation you have has to be business related. In fact, most of your conversations shouldn't be business related. It's important to genuinely take interest in your peers' personal lives. We can all talk about a curb and gutter design but everyone has their own story. Keep in mind that people also enjoy talking about themselves and being truly heard. "Take the time to listen," Roberto advised. Also, remember not to take anyone for granted and to make the effort to talk with everyone. While it's exciting to have a conversation with the current Mayor of a municipality, realize that in 10 years, the intern you talked to once at a meeting could be the PM of a project you are interviewing for. Pete mentioned that a few years ago he was requested to compile a list of all the clients he'd served over his career and was shocked to realize the staggering number. He realized that "creating those relationships doesn't happen overnight." Throughout your career, it will be important to build and retain these relationships. Don't just focus on the business side, but also create personal relationships, no matter how small. One day we will all be surprised by how much our networks will have developed as well. Your reputation is not a short game.