

Kara Snyder 0:00

Hello and welcome to the podcast, a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host Kara Snyder and I serve as the assistant dean of marketing communications and constituent relations for the College. Each episode, we're sitting down with an alum of the College and today we have a chance to talk to Russ Pandy. Russ is a construction management alum and currently serves as vice president of pepper construction of Wisconsin. Welcome and thank you for being here.

Russ Pande 0:28

Thank you, Kara. Thank you for having me and look forward to doing this podcast.

Kara Snyder 0:33

It's gonna be fun. So let's start at the beginning. Why don't you tell our listeners why did you choose ISU?

Russ Pande 0:40

Well, I grew up in Northern Illinois, how many my Rochelle exactly 100 miles straight north and I'm 39 of ISU first generation, my family to go to go to college. And it's really through a lot of the counselors and the faculty that I learned to villainize state. I will admit, as a ignorant teenager, I didn't realize that there was a difference between the University of Illinois and Illinois State University, I did find that out in high school and everything just pointed to Illinois State every time I'd be looking at different schools out of state tuition was not an option for me. Illinois State was an hour and a half from home. And it just everything kept coming back there. Whenever we'd review, we'd look at majors, we'd look at location. And the feedback across the board was always positive from students that I knew that were there. Like I said, the the teachers course Illinois State being originally a teacher's curriculum, just all came back to ASU every single time.

Kara Snyder 1:37

And I love that because I think you're not the only alum who felt that way. You know, it kind of feels like this home away from home here and normal that you can really make your own. So I love hearing that.

Russ Pande 1:47

Just started to other comments on that. So a my drafting teacher in high school, individual by name of Richard Martin, I believe he was a technology student many years prior, and introduced me to the IT format curriculum than another teacher by name Metairie Foster, who was electronics electricity shop class, who went on later on to become a member of the staff at Illinois State. So kind of came back came full circle. You know, they were very instrumental in the decision from Illinois State also.

Kara Snyder 2:18

Well, and I'm wondering, listening to you describe that, did they also help you choose your major? Or how did you end up in construction management,

Russ Pande 2:25

not so much my major and they, they led me to industrial technology and all the different sequences rather than major, it was actually a pleasant surprise that there was a major call construction management. Prior to that I knew of civil engineering. What scared me off to civil engineering is I had the perception that you would be sitting behind a desk designing every day, my entire family was in the construction industry in some form or fashion, whether my dad was a heavy equipment, operator, uncle's, own their own business, what have you some of the best advice I ever received. And from my dad, he actually told me in high school, he goes, You know, it's a great industry and the construction industry, but make your career with your mind, not your body, that it is a great industry, but your body will give out in time working in the trades. So once again, it just really hit all the right spots for construction management. And at the time, get mine I graduated in 1996, fall in 96. But the construction industry, especially in construction management was more catered to the residential side than the commercial side. So that's kind of been a change. But yeah, it just hit all the right spots. I was one of the few students that knew my major before I went in and kept with my major and never had any desire to change majors.

Kara Snyder 3:42

I was gonna say, I feel like that can be kind of rare, actually, these days that you're able to pick it and stick with it and still be in that industry this many years later. I think that's really special.

Russ Pande 3:54

Yeah, it felt comfortable. And I think a lot of it is just you know, how I was raised and being around job sites being around that industry. I just had a comfort level with it.

Kara Snyder 4:03

So tell me you've chosen construction management, you're officially a red bird, what's it like to be on campus as a student? And then what do you miss the most about that time?

Russ Pande 4:15

I mean, as a student, everything is new, you know, everybody's in a hurry to get on your own and get away from home. But one of the things that check the box for when I stayed was it was far enough away but not too far away from home. So like I said earlier, and it was an hour and a half away. The campus experience was extraordinary to this day, it's still I love it. Whenever I'm come down there more times than that I walked through the quad. I walked through, you know the bone, have to stop at the pub, just grab a lunch or grab a drink. Just the whole activity level energy level of being on campus. I've actually had that carried through in the work experience. We've done several student housing projects. One actually was for Illinois State but for other universities and it just the energy of being on a Campus, it's second to none. I mean, it really, it really gives you energy to go do your projects do your job. And, again, one of the things one of the many things I love about campus.

Kara Snyder 5:10

So you're on campus, you graduate, you have your degree, tell our listeners, what was that initial job search like for you? Because I think that can be a very intimidating time for some of our students and young alumni. What was that search process like for you? And then what was your entry level job?

Russ Pande 5:29

Yes, within industrial technology, I was actually able to do a, what they referred to as a dual sequence. Some people call it a double major, I think the dual sequence is more fitting, but I had construction management as my primary sequence. But I also took manufacturing management as a secondary sequence, there's a lot of overlap and classes and figured I could be that much more well versed when I got out. But when I got out, keep in mind, it was 1996. Within the last year of my primary senior in college, there was a new thing called email that came out. It was it was primarily enter university email. And then you know, I remember my last semester selling computer lab and you know, getting an email from a friend at university Iowa, which was something big. So the search was much different than it was now there wasn't internet search was not even to the point of emailing a prospective employer with your resume cover letter. It was it was a lot of the old looking at newspapers, there would be different job postings within the department. But it was a much different approach. Believe it or not, there was there was not a career fair for construction management. At that time, there was a university wide career fair, you really had to go out and find it, what I had learned and kind of been a tool I've used

throughout my career, but you know, networking and word of mouth, you know, talking to different people what's out there. Ultimately, I did end up with job offers, both in the manufacturing sector and the construction management sector. So I was able to make a decision between a handful of different offers some friends and family kind of question me, the offer I took was for construction management with a firm enema matoke associates was based out of Oak Brook, Illinois, that offer was not as competitive as some of the manufacturing offers. But like I said earlier, you know, construction just really checked all the boxes. For me, I knew that was something I wanted to do on my future I didn't I liked the diversity of you know, being in the office one day job site, the next meetings and that no two days are the same. My first job was with Mintaka associates and Oak Brook, Illinois. And the other thing about that time was, like I said earlier, it was much more residential based. A lot of friends that I went school with went to go on to work for residential kind of subcontractors, or contractors or developers, my preference was to be more on the commercial side of things a little different approach than we've seen now is very different.

Kara Snyder 7:49

You know, I heard you say newspapers, and it's like, wow, that that is just a very different approach than our students today would take. But I also heard you say, networking, which is something that is still so important. And I think networking can sound a little bit scary and feel a little bit pressurized to some of our students, right? There's a lot weighing on the networking process. Can you talk a little bit about the value of networking? And if you have any tips to make that seem a little bit less stressful?

Russ Pande 8:21

Yes, can be intimidating, asking, you know, friends, family members, neighbors, people, you know, in the community, if they know anything in the market. But now that I look at it from a different perspective, people are always willing to help for the most part, especially students coming out, what can we do to help and I found that really talking to an uncle talking to a co worker, my father's you know, that they would really bend over backwards to give me a phone number and a name of somebody and call ahead of time to tell them that I would be calling to really help set me up for success. And it was something I speak up every day. Now you know, it just word of mouth, communicating, talking to people, and it helps you in so many avenues from a sales perspective on the work front. And that's really what this is all about. The sales finding the next opportunity and it was a great introduction earlier my at the beginning of my career, getting out of your comfort zone and making the calls and meeting new people.

Kara Snyder 9:15

And so tell us speaking of the next opportunity, tell us how you got from Oak Brook to your current position and was concept being the vice president of pepper construction. What did that journey look like?

Russ Pande 9:29

Well, it's a good word, a journey. first company I worked for they were architecture, construction management. The architecture we did was for the projects we managed, although at the time that said they weren't feeding into the walls, you really did have to learn how to do things on your own. Both estimating being a superintendent project management. It was a crash course on construction management. And it was kind of sink or swim. We had a very understanding owner and other staff that helped guide me along the way What I learned was at first firm for three and a half years and what I learned when I was started talking to pepper construction in 2000. A couple other large general contractors was the diversity of skills that I received at the first company. Like I said, construction management as a project manager, Superintendent on the project cost estimating pre construction, the diversity of skills already had started to separate me from some of my peers that I graduated with, that may have worked for a larger contractor and a focus in one specific area. So started for pepper construction, and in 2000, totally different perspective of the industry. You know, the first project I was on was a \$75 million, 1 million square foot mile renovation in Eden Prairie, Wisconsin, and it was already in Prairie Minnesota. And it was just a totally different end of the spectrum. It was intimidating. The first time I stepped foot on the job site, and I was worried it would be overwhelming. But I learned it's back to basics. It's still the same basics, whether you're running a small project, or a large project or medium sized project and the diversity of skills and getting back to basics, I was able to get up to speed and sprint forward right away. So worked with pepper. This was out of their Barrington, Illinois location, and then the Chicago location for roughly six and a half years. An opportunity opened up with a another firm, which at the time, I think I was 32 years old. And I went from being a project manager at pepper to an operations manager for coming to my my wife's builders, it was a increase of several positions from what I was what I was in which that was a new experience. You know, I went from managing projects, multiple projects to managing people. I think when I started, I had direct reports of 40 to 45 individuals, I realized real quick that it is easier to run projects than to manage people and all the challenges that came with it kind of funny. I remember the moment one of the hardest classes I in college for me was psychology, just the way my brain work. You know, I needed a definitive answer, you know, and that's just how I worked. So psychology, I was questioning, you know, why did we have that as a major? Or why was that a required class for construction management? Well, I learned quickly, you know, that why as builders, you know, you have to deal with different people in different ways to you know, get to your desired outcomes. Metallica was Minnesota headquarter worked out of their Chicago location started out great, you know, a lot of projects went and work left and right. And then all of a sudden, a couple years later, the recession hit our Werkstatt our workforce went from 60 some odd employees to less than 20 employees in less than a year. And that was a direct result of the work just wasn't out there. I mean, we had three rounds of layoffs and good people that that we didn't have projects for so unfortunately they

were laid off so mentioned the word journey was a journey to get through that went from managing a lot of people to then doing what we had to to get by during the recession, traveling for work, managing people and managing projects. And everything kind of comes full circle with both ISU and career wise so always had good communication with pepper construction. Our former President made the comment to me when I left in 2006 You know, someday you'll be back and that they happened in 2014. Just the timing and the desire to not travel as much for work Robin back to pepper working on the Chicago office in 2014. A funny thing is my first product that I landed after being back was a traveling job to Wisconsin to hockey with Brookfield, Wisconsin, which is suburb of Milwaukee, and just where my resume fit Rob project standpoint, and it was full speed ahead. The negative was that it was another two to three years of traveling, which there are a lot of great things about traveling at that time our family was young, we had two young children. So that created some challenges that we worked through ran the call it was called the corners of Brookfield project. Like I said \$100 million plus project won largest projects in Wisconsin at that time for a two to three year time period. When that project was completed in 2017. Hyper construction approached me about opening up a new office in Milwaukee and asked if I was willing to be part of that new venture. Summer of 2018. We, my family moved to Milwaukee, and I've been up here ever since.

Kara Snyder 14:25

Something that stood out to me when you're talking about that journey is talking about the supervision of people and I imagine that your projects were a lot more predictable than your people right when you were talking about how that presents some challenges. So tell me I'm curious, what do you look for when you are hiring individuals? What do you look for from a successful team member?

Russ Pande 14:51

It was challenging managing people and you really have to take the time to get to know the people and what what makes them tick, what motivates them and what their strengths and weakness CES are what I look for what we look for now, a lot of it is just an initiative. I'm down once a year for the construction management career fair. Now more than ever, we're seeing freshmen that are coming to the career fair, sophomores that are coming the career fair. You know, there's there's been a couple different students over the years. They just started at Illinois State two weeks prior, and they're already going through the career fair. That's the first step right, there's taking initiative, it's sometimes hard for a freshman to realize this, but they're really setting the setting the groundwork for their their college career and their future career taking initiative getting involved, you know, I don't think the fresh mountain so I go into the career fair thinking they're gonna land the drought dream internship or dream position, but they're at least getting exposure and getting involved. So Initiative is a big trait we look for well rounded students, you heard me say earlier, but you know, I was lucky in that I got experience, both as a field superintendent, and pre construction, doing estimating work and project

management, when we see students that are willing to get exposed to different elements in the industry, that's a positive, you never know where your career is going to take you. And at the same time, you know, many years later, when you hope these people are in a senior leadership position, you do want them to have exposure to all the different elements of the industry. One more trait that I think is as real as estate, you know, a sense of humor, and keeping it real, I will joke during interviews is to keep people on their toes when I will ask them sports questions, who's their favorite team and still a diehard Chicago Cubs fan to this day, but the people you work with your often times with that group people more than you're with your own family, having a sense of humor, keep it real initiative, those are some of the traits we look for.

Kara Snyder 16:42

I think that's really helpful. It's definitely something our students can relate to, and hopefully absorb. When you were moving into this leadership role. Supervising others, did you have any goals for yourself? Did you have a set leadership style? Or have you seen your leadership style evolve over time?

Russ Pande 17:00

I think it's evolved over time, it'd be an interesting question to ask, ask people that I work with, I think it's always evolving. You know, I was 32 years old, and you know, had several direct reports and direct reports that were my parents age, and just how you communicate with the people. And I remember an experience on a job site. And I was young in my career. And this kind of goes to the same topic, but we're wrecking, you know, major structural steel components at a hospital and I was watching and I just couldn't believe what I was watching. It was so cool. And I didn't 100% Understand the shop, runs the foreman for the crew, he comes up to me and says, okay, kid, what's next? I was very honest, that said, You guys are experts at this, you know, I'm early on in my career, I'm learning as I go. Like, I put his arm around my shoulder and said, okay, good answer, we're gonna we're gonna walk you through this and show you. So it's really it, just understanding people, you know, some people, sometimes people have a bad day, or they have things going on their personal life and being understanding of that, my leadership style. Now, I really like to get to know the person, you know, what makes them tick. One thing that two to three of my former bosses did and I really try to make this a big point of my career is don't ask somebody to do something that you can't do or won't do, or haven't done on your own prior scheduling, for example, in construction management will build a schedule, putting up top four, it's challenging to this day, I'll pull up a chair next to a staff members are working on it, and I'll work through it with them, keeps me sharp, it keeps me relative. And you know, I think it also shows that, you know, I'm willing to jump in the trenches with them.

Kara Snyder 18:33

I think that's a great point. And I really liked what you said about just being honest, when you don't know how to do something, I think that humility in that vulnerability helps make you really relatable to those that you're working with in supervising. So I really appreciate that. Thank you. Well, I'm curious now. So your job has taken you all over the place, you've met a lot of people, you've been on a lot of interesting job sites, what is your favorite part of your job?

Russ Pande 19:01

By far the people, your co workers, the clients, the architects, the engineers you work with? And you know, the friendships that come out of that. I mean, I also take a lot of pride and mentoring, you know, hiring interns, you know, new students and spending time with them, you know, it's really given back that's a satisfying part of the industry is really, you know, seeing people's growth in knowing that you were you a part of their development.

Kara Snyder 19:25

And I think that's great, because you're I remember you saying at the beginning talking about people that looked out for you, and it sounds like you had some really important mentors in your life. So the fact that you're able to do that for others, I think is a great example of paying it forward. I also know that somehow you find time to give back to ISU and people in the Construction Management major here despite the fact that you're several hours away. Can you tell us how you're able to fit that in your busy schedule and why you think it is so important?

Russ Pande 19:55

I make it a priority. I really do. I feel strongly about university I feel very strong about the Construction Management Department and Department of Technology. It's a given the career fairs, the advisory board that I've been a part of for many, many years, I just want to, you know, always give the university every chance to put the right foot forward and to grow and improve and the students and another result of that, you know, I'll meet students here and you're out that are part of the program with the career fairs, some of which we hire for internships, or full time several that go on to work for other companies, I'd stay in contact with a lot of these ISU alum, and, you know, hearing their stories here and how they've succeeded. And you know, I'll see somebody at a sports game or concert or out to dinner, and you know, several years later, where they come up and tell me what they're running and where they're like a proud parent at that point, because I've seen how they've grown. And to your point, you know, giving back University gave me a lot give me a lot of exposure, it gave me the career that I that I now have, I just I enjoy giving back and you know, seeing everybody grow and the different events throughout the years, it really means a lot to me.

Kara Snyder 21:03

Well, on behalf of the university and the college and the department, I will thank you for your time because we really value alumni giving back and giving their time and sharing their expertise. So I will say thank you for that. Thank you. Well, we will go ahead and finish with a speed round just to get to know you a little bit better as we wrap up here. So go with your first instinct on these questions. Are you a morning person or a night owl?

Russ Pande 21:28

Morning person? Coffee, please.

Kara Snyder 21:31

Okay, that was gonna be my next question to coffee or tea. Do you drink it just straight black?

Russ Pande 21:36

I prefer with a splash of coconut milk and cream. But I can drink it black as well.

Kara Snyder 21:43

What's your favorite season?

Russ Pande 21:45

Summer the warm temperatures the sun being out on the water with with my family? Nothing's better.

Kara Snyder 21:50

I hear Yah. What are you reading or listening to right now? Any specific book or podcast you'd like to recommend?

Russ Pande 21:58

actually listening to I would say in the last week and it kind of Jimmy Buffett passed away. Here we go. I've been listening to that. Reading more articles. kind of goes with what I just said. Being out on the water with the family. You know it? It's a good tone and listen to a lot of Buffett lays very chill vibes.

Kara Snyder 22:17

I like it. What's your favorite thing to cook for dinner?

Russ Pande 22:22

Shish kabobs on the grill. Nice.

Kara Snyder 22:25

It comes full circle with summer being your favorite season, I guess. What's the best trip you've ever taken?

Russ Pande 22:32

To date? I would say Maui our honeymoon 18 years ago. Unfortunately, some of those areas just were devastated by the fires. But Molly was beautiful. Always happy thoughts when we look back?

Oh yeah, definitely a piece of paradise, I'm sure. And then I do have a question for you. I think I know your answer to this. But I have to ask a volunteers gondola or pub to cheese balls.

Well, I'll go with the gondola being the politically correct answer. Because every time I come to campus, I'll always stop and get a couple gondolas and bring them bring them back home with me. But at the same time, I do always try to make it a point to get to the pub every time I'm done. Maybe, maybe, maybe, maybe it's a tie.

Kara Snyder 23:14

You can save off. No worries. And one last question for you. If you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

Russ Pande 23:23

I hope this has come out in this podcast. But let's say again, get involved, network, get exposed to different areas. You know, the students here you're starting to career while you're in college, you know, you're laying the groundwork, just get to know your faculty and get to know your fellow students. Get involved in different organizations. The more you can do, the more you can

get involved. You're just laying the groundwork for a successful future and skill sets that you'll continue to use in your career.

Kara Snyder 23:50

That's great advice. Thank you so much. And thanks again for being here.

Russ Pande 23:55

Thank you. I appreciate the time and the world of Illinois State University in the Department. So thank you.

Kara Snyder 24:00

That was Russ Pandy, Vice President of pepper construction of Wisconsin. Join us next time on the podcast for more stories from our cast alumni.