



ASPLUNDH®



Hear from the ISA Gold Canopy Partners – Asplundh

The ISA Canopy Partners program is a collaborative initiative that brings together industry leaders to support ISA's mission to promote the professional practice of arboriculture, inform the public about tree benefits, and provide a global network of arborists, urban foresters, and people who care for trees.

We met with Kieran Hunt, a manager with [Asplundh](#), an ISA Gold Canopy Partner, to discuss their views on the industry and how they see it changing in the coming years.

What are some industry trends that Asplundh has seen or that you have seen that were current that the company is currently working on?

Adoption of Digital Platform

Vegetation managers are adopting a more data-driven approach to how they manage the vegetation around their infrastructure and try to be more spatial about it, with digital work management platforms –remote sensing, LIDAR, aerial imagery, satellite imagery – especially at larger investor-owned utilities, but even in some of the smaller utility spaces.

Most utilities, if not all, have maps of their circuits, and often those are live. They have line maps and can see where all their poles and lines are. They can see what's energized, what's not energized, and what the configurations of each circuit are. But they don't have a whole lot of visibility of the vegetation around that infrastructure.

In the United States, vegetation management is often one of the two largest O&M budget items. To not have data to support your vegetation management program is a problem in this day and age. So, utilities, especially larger investor-owned utilities that have stakeholders and regulatory requirements, need to justify rate cases and their spend. It's more and more important for them to be more data-driven in their approach.

Tree care employees are harder to find.

I'd say that movement into the digital space coincides with a trend I think is industry-wide, not just in the utility space. We are having a hard time finding employees. There are fewer people entering the tree care industry than there have been historically, and we're having a lot of turnover.

To get the job done with fewer resources, we're also, in addition to all of that digital work management and remote sensing tools to help make us more efficient, we're pivoting toward the use of more specialized equipment to work more efficiently, more cost effectively and also in a safer way. Some of these mechanized tools can get the job done without putting a climber in a tree, which is generally going to be safe.



How do you see the industry growing in the next few years?

I'd say we're seeing a diversification of the workforce. So again, because there have been fewer people entering the workforce, I think we're seeing utilities and contractors, Asplundh included, changing our approach to how we get the work done.

We're also seeing a move toward integrated vegetation management, which is a more ecosystem-based approach. IVM, or integrated vegetation management, really drives toward reducing your overall inputs. If you know you're going out and mowing the right-of-way every year, or every few years, you have the same cost over and over again. But if you can convert that right-of-way into a habitat that is self-sustaining, then you can reduce your overall management inputs, which reduces your cost. It also reduces your greenhouse gas emissions and the number of employees needed to maintain that right-of-way. It's more so on transmission, but we do see it on distribution where we do that work.

Also, the movement toward these modern approaches is having an impact on who enters the workforce. We're seeing more ecologists, people with backgrounds in project management and other fields enter the industry. There has been an uptick of that sort of credentialed employee stepping into the business.

Follow-up: Do you see there being more need for vegetation management services in the future or is it already a mature industry?

I think it's changing, but I'm not sure that there's going to be more or less. But I think that we need to learn how to do more with less. It ultimately comes down to being more efficient and being smarter. What we're really driving toward is a more conditions-based approach to help our customers cut trees that need to be cut and drive by the trees that don't. That requires more advanced tracking. You really need to understand the growth rates and the cycle and what it takes to keep the lights on. That's where a lot of these digital tools come in.

What are some key things that ISA members should know about Asplundh?

I'd say that we are diversifying our workforce. Not everybody needs to start as a ground person in order to move through the ranks here. That is the traditional approach to working in one of our operational regions. I would say that today people with a background in natural resource management and project management and other related fields have a place here.

So, if you have that sort of background and you're looking for a fast-paced, highly demanding but highly rewarding job, I'd say that Asplundh is a great place to jump into utility vegetation management. This work isn't for everyone. It's a completely different set of criteria from what most arborists outside of the utility space are used to. But we see direct impacts to human quality of life in our work because electricity is so integral to how our society runs today.

What is Asplundh focused on in the near term and then how about long range like five years and beyond?

A lot of what we're focused on in the near term is what I've already talked about: the expansion of our digital offerings and being more synergistic with how we work with our customers. In the short term, we are partnering with utilities to use the data they have and the data that we have in order to



perform spatial analysis and understand where to use our resources and our specialized equipment.

What we're working toward in the long term is to develop a more turnkey approach that would allow a utility to turn over their vegetation management program to us. It might not sound attractive to a lot of utilities, but we know how to do this work. We've been doing it effectively and safely for almost 100 years now. Our approach is continuing to grow and modernize.

How is Asplundh making the industry better through innovations and / or investments?

This is in line with what we've been talking about. We are actively working to advance how utility decision makers structure their vegetation management programs to be dynamic, to be responsive to conditions on the ground, to improve customer reliability and to be responsive to the actual conditions of the vegetation.

That involves bringing in everything you can to build the best program you can and doing it in a way that has feedback loops so that it integrates with our internal systems, the utilities' systems and continuously updating other information, for example outage data, remote sensing data like LIDAR or satellite imagery.

This allows us to be very dynamic, very data-driven and very conditions-based and focused on how we maintain the system to maximize reliability – to trim what needs trimming and to leave the rest. So that's really what we're driving toward. It should be a better bang for the customers' buck.