



Show Number: 764

Jake Avila, DPPD

Middle Tennessee State University

The Restoration Industry's 2nd Act with Higher Education

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Good day and welcome to IAQ Radio+ episode 764 blog. This week we welcomed Dr. Jake Avila of Middle Tennessee State University to discuss The Restoration Industry's 2nd Act with Higher Education. In 2011 IAQradio interviewed Professor Randy Rapp to discuss the Disaster Restoration and Reconstruction Management program he oversaw at Purdue University. After a 15-year run at Purdue, Dr. Rapp retired, essentially ending the restoration industry's foray as Act 1 with higher education.

Dr. Jake Avila, Associate Professor at Middle Tennessee State University, discussed his work at MTSU's School of Concrete and Construction Management. The challenge for the restoration industry is, will this 2nd opportunity for higher education be more successful than the 1st and significantly advance recognition of the trade of damage repair.

Dr. Avila is a scholar-practitioner and is committed to enhancing the work of restoration industry professionals through applied research. Since 2008 Dr. Avila has taught in business, engineering, and construction programs at the graduate and undergraduate levels. Prior to coming to MTSU he served two other institutions as an associate professor, business department chair, MBA program director, and program director in a college of engineering.

Summary Interview

Quick recap

The interview featured Dr. Jake Avila, a former construction industry professional who transitioned to academia at Middle Tennessee State University, discussing his background and research in the restoration industry. Avila highlighted the need for workforce development in the restoration industry, drawing parallels to the successful Concrete Industry Management program at MTSU and emphasizing the importance of industry involvement in educating future restorers. The discussion concluded with details about fundraising efforts for a potential MTSU restoration program, including discussions about past industry partnerships with universities and the need for continued support to establish a lasting connection between the restoration industry and higher education.

Next steps

Summary

Avila's Academic and Industry Transition

Dr. Jake Avila, an experienced construction industry professional, transitioned to academia after moving from California to Tennessee with his family. He currently teaches at Middle Tennessee State University, where he focuses on enhancing the restoration industry through applied research and education. Avila discussed his passion for hunting and outdoor activities in Tennessee, contrasting it with his previous experiences in California. The episode also included a trivia question about MTSU's most popular alumnus and highlighted the show's sponsors, including the Institute for Inspection, Cleaning, and Restoration Certification (IICRC).

Construction Expert's Academic Journey

Dr. Jake Avila shared his background in the construction and restoration industry, tracing his family's business history in Southern California from the 1980s. He described his transition from running the family business to pursuing higher education, including his experience teaching entrepreneurship at a community college, and later earning a doctorate in policy planning and development from USC. He also mentioned obtaining contractor licenses in California and his current role as a professor at Middle Tennessee State University, where he continues to teach and conduct research.

Restoration Research and Industry Collaboration

Jake Avila discussed his research approach in the restoration industry, emphasizing his commitment to bridging academic theory with practical industry applications. He highlighted his focus on family business dynamics and employee burnout, collaborating with industry professionals and publishing findings in both academic and industry-focused outlets. Les Cunningham's financial support was crucial for covering research costs, and Jake encouraged industry participation in surveys to enhance data collection. He also shared his ongoing collaboration with Randy Rapp on a textbook for Purdue University's restoration program, which could benefit MTSU's program.

Restoration Industry Workforce Pipeline Challenges

Dr. Jake Avila discussed the challenges of workforce pipeline development in the restoration industry, highlighting the limited presence of restoration contractors at career fairs and educational events. He emphasized that while university degree programs are important, a broader industry effort is needed to engage high school and college students, including improving the industry's recruitment presence and messaging. Avila also noted that restoration contractors often focus too much on industry challenges, such as cash flow and carrier relationships, rather than highlighting the positive aspects of the career, which could help attract new talent.

CIM Model for Restoration Education

The meeting discussed the success of the Concrete Industry Management (CIM) program at MTSU, which was the first and flagship program in the country, with similar programs now at four other universities. Jake Avila explained how the CIM program was initiated by the concrete industry to address a workforce shortage, resulting in an 84% retention rate and near 100% job placement for graduates. The discussion explored how the restoration industry could learn from the CIM model, noting that the restoration industry is significantly larger than the concrete industry, with estimates ranging from \$200 billion to \$250 billion annually. The conversation ended with Jake making an elevator pitch for industry support of a potential MTSU restoration program, highlighting the need for industry involvement in educating the next generation of restorers through hands-on learning opportunities.

MTSU Restoration Fundraising Campaign

The meeting discussed the fundraising efforts for a restoration program at MTSU, with Jake explaining they need to raise \$3 million, of which \$1 million will fund faculty appointments and \$2 million will support student scholarships. The university has agreed to 0% overhead on donations, ensuring 100% of funds go directly to the program. Pete inquired about Les's Gathering of Eagles events and salary competitiveness with other construction programs, with Jake confirming the next event is scheduled for January 27-29 and reporting that graduates earn salaries between \$50,000 to \$85,000, which appears competitive according to industry feedback.

Restoration Industry-Urban Education Partnerships

Pete discussed the history of restoration industry partnerships with universities, particularly highlighting Purdue's 10-year program that fell short of its fundraising goal, which would have provided matching funds for a research lab. He emphasized that the industry needs to continue building on these initiatives, with Jake Avila's program at MTSU representing a new opportunity to establish a lasting connection between the restoration industry and higher education. Cliff noted that the original Purdue program was supported by individual donations of \$15,000 per year for 10 years from 10 people, totaling \$1,500,000, and suggested that a similar grassroots approach could be effective for MTSU's program.

Z-man's Nuggets mined from today's show:

Dr. Jake, please introduce yourself to our audience by giving us a brief overview of your family's history with the industry as restoration contractors based in Southern California?

Dr. Avila's father worked in the restoration industry in the 1980s. In the 1990s, Jake's father started his own restoration business which was run out of the family's home. Jake remembers his father's recognition of the importance and value of Xactimate estimating software. Jake remembers using the DOS version of Xactimate.

Dr. Avila's industry experience began with his immersion in his father's restoration business. He walked fire and water damage worksites with his father. His restoration and construction experience spans 17 years. Before transitioning to academia, he served as Executive VP and GM of California Construction, a family-owned business specializing in disaster restoration and government contracting. As GM he oversaw the business operation as well as construction and consulting services to government agencies, homeowners, property managers, law firms, AEC firms, third-party administrators, and insurance carriers.

Jake got into academia through happenstance. As a business owner, Jake served on the advisory board of a local university. When another advisory board stakeholder who worked for the community college approached Jake to fill in an open teaching position; Jake knew from teaching the first day that was what he wanted to do.

University professors are required to do research and publish papers. He was frustrated because most academic research is exposed to a limited audience of other researchers. Seeking a wider audience for his research, Jake seeks to involve restoration practitioners in both research and the findings of that research. Dr. Avila is a scholar practitioner who is committed to enhancing the work restoration industry professionals through applied research. The underlying goal in his work is to assist disaster restoration build industry capacity by systematically advancing the understanding of industry dynamics, improving the design and application of best practices, and strengthening connections between scholarly and professional activities. He has researched: family businesses, family dynamics within restoration firms, employee burnout, and estimator burnout.

How has your research been financed?

Jake explained that accessing validated research is expensive; on a pay-per-view basis. Jake credits Les Cunningham and his Business Networks group as a primary source of his research funding.

Can you tell us about your relationship with Dr. Randy Rapp?

Jake's relationship with Randy Rapp, D.Mgt, PE, CCP goes back to 2014ish when he encountered Randy's body of academic work while doing research. Jake has cooperated with Randy Rapp and Francois Jacobs, PhD on research and industry projects. Jake and Randy are writing the second edition Disaster Recovery Project Management: Bringing Order from Chaos (Purdue Handbooks in Building Construction).

When you speak at disaster restoration industry events, what is the audience's biggest concern?

Getting more workforce into the pipeline.

What suggestions or strategies do you have for getting more workforce into the pipeline?

Restoration firms seeking workers should attend career fairs, meet and engage with college freshmen from day 1. Invest time and money in creating relationships with students. Jake is confident that restoration contractors can out-recruit other trades looking for workers.

The concrete industry story:

25 years ago, the concrete industry sought to get more people into the pipeline. Now graduates fill every needed role with an 84% retention rate. From College Day 1, students are more informed about opportunities and are making more informed career decisions and committing to careers. The concrete program at MTSU was an idea born from industry. The US concrete industry is \$120B. By contrast the restoration industry is twice that size.

Elevator pitch:

In order to get more young people into the restoration industry pipeline everyone needs to pitch in. Educating young people after our industry is important. When recruiting students at MTSU for the concrete industry, the industry brings in large concrete equipment, demonstrates how concrete is made, and concrete is tested for compression strength. The restoration industry should learn from the concrete industry's success and do the same thing.

Biographical Sketch



Jacob A. Avila, DPPD; "Dr. Jake"

Dr. Avila's industry experience spans over seventeen years in the construction industry where he worked primarily in general management. Prior to his transition to academia, he served as executive vice president and general manager of CA Construction, a family-owned construction firm specializing in disaster restoration and government contracting. As general manager he oversaw the business operations as well as construction and consulting services to government agencies, homeowners, property managers, law firms, AEC firms, third-party administrators, and major insurance carriers.

He is a scholar-practitioner and is committed to enhancing the work of restoration industry professionals through applied research. The underlying goal in all his work is to help disaster restoration firms build capacity by systematically advancing the understanding of industry dynamics, improving the design and application of best practices, and strengthening connections between scholarly and professional activities. His research recently examined family business dynamics in the restoration industry and, in collaboration with faculty at Purdue University; he is currently the principal investigator of a study that is examining employee burnout and engagement in the restoration industry.

Since 2008 Dr. Avila has taught in business, engineering, and construction programs at the graduate and undergraduate levels. Prior to coming to MTSU he served two other institutions as an associate professor, business department chair, MBA program director, and program director in a college of engineering.

Dr. Avila holds a bachelor's degree in industrial/organizational psychology from Pepperdine University, a Master of Business Administration from California Baptist University, and a doctorate from the University of Southern California. As an undergraduate he studied at ITESM in Guadalajara, Mexico, and while pursuing his master's degree he studied at Regent's Park College of the University of Oxford in Oxford, England.

He and his wife, Becca, have been married since 2004 and they have three children: Jackson, Liv, and Jeremiah. They live in Franklin, Tennessee and love to travel, explore, hike, fish, hunt, and do many other things outdoors.

FOOTNOTE: Link to Dr. Jake's Doctoral Credential
[Doctor of Policy, Planning, and Development \(DPPD\) | USC Price](#)