

Meet Vallen Dai, the most recent addition to our Quantity Surveying team, and what an addition he is.



Read our interview with Vallen Dai who joined the Kaizon team in 2019. Vallen is one of our Quantity Surveyors and has quickly developed a great reputation amongst the entire team at Kaizon and with our clients. Find out about his experience below and what advice he offers to others.

1. Tell us about your background, where did you study etc?

I studied in Singapore and the UK for some years and graduated with a master's degree in Intelligent Buildings. Before becoming a quantity surveyor I worked as an interior designer in Singapore and participated in several coal-fired power plant construction projects in China and Vietnam as a cost engineer (similar role to a quantity surveyor). This is where I gained experience in cost management, contract management and project management which I found I really enjoyed.

It was at this time that I knew what I wanted to do with my future - so I embarked on my journey to become a quantity surveyor. I moved to New Zealand and studied at Massey University where I graduated with a post-graduate diploma in quantity surveying with distinction. I worked for a local building company for three and a half years before I joined Kaizon.

2. Why did you choose to become a Quantity Surveyor?

To me, it feels like quantity surveying actually chose me (haha). When I was considering what my next step should be, quantity surveying stood out from all the other options I had. As you know, a quantity surveyor needs to be able to understand drawings, be confident with numbers and calculations, and be familiar with construction methodologies, contract clauses and cost management (which is where my experience working contractor side was useful). That's exactly the set of skills I have already developed through my previous work experiences and I really enjoyed using.

Additionally, I also like that quantity surveying often leads you to work on different projects concurrently – it is never a dull job.

3. What is something that is commonly misunderstood about quantity surveying?

One common thought is that quantity surveying is a boring, office-based job which entails dull tasks such as doing take-offs and calculations all day long. However, take-offs and calculations are only a small part of a quantity surveyor's job.

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So, what does take up most of our time? Firstly, communication. We liaise with multiple stakeholders throughout the project such as calling or emailing subcontractors/suppliers for a quote, meeting clients to discuss payment claims, or liaising with the architect on cost-saving material options. Secondly, study. We must ensure we are always knowledgeable about new and current construction regulations, contract updates, new material specifications, or new construction methodologies. A lot of our work is also visiting the project site. The reasons for site visits range from investigating a site for a new project, checking the building progress for a payment claim, taking progress photos and more. So, as you can see quantity surveying is not an easy job and there is a lot to it – more than I originally thought before entering this career.

4. What is the most unique project you have worked on in your career, and why?

Projects are never the same, therefore, every project is unique to me and I know I can always learn something new from each project.

But, if I had to choose one, I would say the coal-fired power plant construction project which I was involved with on behalf of the main contractor. It was a large-scale project (valued NZD\$900M) with a tight construction schedule (18 months), which meant each month there was a huge amount of cash flow (approx. NZD\$180M in and out per month at the peak). As the only site Quantity Surveyor for the main contractor, I was facing huge challenges on cash flow forecasting, subcontracts management, variations management and payment management.

Fortunately, I made it through, and the project became one of the most successful projects in the company’s history, which I can feel proud of. But to me, the most important thing is that it has tested and improved my skills a lot, and it has made me understand a very basic, yet valuable, principle (which has become one of my core beliefs): ‘No matter how big or small a project is, as the Quantity Surveyor of a project, we must always make sure that every penny spent on the project is reasonable.’



“I think the industry faces similar pressures as those seen overseas which can influence the overall quality of buildings, such as cost and time pressures, and the introduction of new untested products.”

5. What are the most challenging aspects of being a Quantity Surveyor?

I think one challenging aspect is that we need to be imaginative and creative. Sometimes, a client will request an estimate based on a concept design. For us to provide a relevant and accurate estimate, we need to think as an architect or an engineer, and make reasonable assumptions based on the details we are given – whether the mid-floor structure is timber framing or concrete laid in a concrete tray, as well as the wall finish in the bathroom is painted Gib lining or tiles. In this context, the experience of a quantity surveyor becomes very important. Drawing on our previous experience, we can think of the best and most reasonable option to make the estimate more accurate.

6. What is the most important advice you would give someone who is looking to hire a Quantity Surveyor for their development?

When choosing a quantity surveyor, people often ask what projects the quantity surveyor has worked on, what are the size of the projects, and if they have experience on other similar projects. This is partially right as all of those things are important. But what I would also consider when looking for a quantity surveyor is what resources they have access to.

For a mid-size plus project, a quantity surveyor can rarely do it alone if he wants to maximize the client's interest. As I mentioned before, a quantity surveyor needs to liaise with all stakeholders to achieve the best result, and thus further fulfil the client's expectation. In this way I am grateful to Kaizon for providing me such a resourceful platform to serve our clients – we have an experienced quantity surveying team (all very nice and talented people), our own QS database, and a range of other specialist teams which we can engage to help with our projects, these include; project management, architecture, engineering and a building surveying team. This makes it very easy for me to gather the information I need, which means I can provide quality and efficient services to our clients.

7. Any advice for someone considering quantity surveying as a career?

Stop thinking and just put it into action. You will find it challenging, yet full of fun. If you have any concerns, please feel free to contact me or our team. We are here to help.

