

HEAPY Solutions' Michael Berning and MEP Emerging Trends | Transcript

Introduction ([00:02](#)):

Welcome to green building matters. The podcast that matters for green building professionals learn insight in green building as we interviewed today's experts in LEED and WELL. We'll learn from their career paths, war stories and all things green because green building matters and now our host and yes, he has every LEED and WELL credential. Here's Charlie Cichetti .

Charlie ([00:33](#)):

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New Speaker ([01:01](#)):

Welcome to the next episode of the green building matters podcast. I'm your host, Charlie Cichetti. I've got another great green building professional with us, actually, Michael Berning from Dayton, Ohio is with us. He's the chief innovation officer at HEAPY, Michael, how are you doing today? Doing great. Thanks for having me looking forward to hearing more of your backstory, some really cool projects. You've worked on your transition from sustainability to innovation. I know there's a lot of overlap there. I'm going to grill you on that. Take us back, Michael, where'd you grow up and go to school?

Michael ([01:29](#)):

Well, I grew up in an inner city kid in Toledo, Ohio, and I appreciated getting out of the inner city and into Boys Scouts and going camping and hiking and nature and seeing what nature was all about playing in the creeks. It was kind of a good learning experience as a child. Then my parents had siblings that I've got, we had all kinds of magazines and technical manuals. My dad's an electrical engineer, a civil engineer, and there were electrical magazines or mechanical magazines, everything. I gravitated, remember in the

seventies, big technical stuff and popular science, popular mechanics was a space shuttle and solar energy, this new solar stuff, so that just drew me into looking for a program in college for solar energy.

Charlie ([02:30](#)):

It makes a lot of sense. I mean, energy prices, solar you're right. The space race they're coming out of sixties in the seventies. Appreciation for nature. I just heard that you already had that at a young age. So is that like an annual tradition as a family or just really trying to get out there more? Tell us about that?

Michael ([02:48](#)):

Well, I was in a very active Boy Scout troop and we camped every week, every I'm sorry, every month. And then I'd like to do it every week, but it was a full weekend. Three, four days. We'd go a week in July on a 80 mile canoe trip. We just were always out and it was great for us kids in the inner city that we saw that. We got out and learned all about trees and just animals and everything that made nature and how they all codependent upon each other. And so that kind of pique that interest and I was technical minded. So of course I went solar and then it all came together in college and post-college with just meshing all that, those interests together.

Charlie ([03:35](#)):

Okay. I'm connecting the dots and so mechanical engineering, right. That's your degree. So tell us about that. How'd you end up where you were in college and did you want to design systems or just continue that curiosity from scratch?

Michael ([03:50](#)):

Well, what I wanted to do is design a better, more efficient solar collector. It was pretty interesting that at college night at St. Francis in Toledo, we're all sitting around and all the college counselors are up there, picking my college and all the parents in the room, there's like 500 of us in the cafeteria. I sat in the front row for some reason, not good reason and he pointed at me and said, what do you want to be? This is 1976 and I go, I want to be an energy engineer and the entire crowd burst out laughing. So,

you could take that as a bummer, wow, that's probably not a good choice, but I think I'm laughing today.

Charlie ([04:37](#)):

You're early, real, early in it. And now obviously CEM is just one of many credentials you have and it just made sense at the time for you. Now tell us when you are getting out of college because you've been at one company for most of your career. So what was that early career like? How'd you end up where you are now?

Michael ([04:56](#)):

Well, you're absolutely right. I've been at HEAPY for almost 41 years now. So when I was in college looking at solar and then my professor Henry Chung was very much into energy and he was on the energy conservation committee for the University of Dayton and this consultant Dickerson who was with HEAPY, was on the committee for the university. I was working for the professor so I was at all the committee meetings and that gentlemen, Dickerson said to me, one day, if you ever need a job, come see me. I was a junior in college and I'm like, well, I don't know. My dad always said, don't throw away business cards. So I kept his business card the very next year I was paying for my own college. So I needed a job. So I called him up. It was my first day back to Dayton to go to school. I called him and said, can I have a job and I have not stopped working for HEAPY since that day.

Charlie ([05:54](#)):

It's amazing what a good pro tip from your dad, business card keeps all those connections relationships. So were there any other mentors though, you mentioned a professor by name, who else had some influence on you there early in this sustainable?

Michael ([06:10](#)):

Oh, so we were focusing on the energy conservation committee with Dr. Chong and Dick Pearson from HEAPY for the university's energy profile. I'm working and learning more about energy and building energy and building systems. I will take the job at HEAPY and continue my career. And then the green building movement started up and I started talking to folks about LEED and what LEED is all about. No one really knew what it was and I'm in

the Midwest. So this certainly wasn't a coast where it was really going quite well in the early two thousands. I came across Jerry Wilson and you've had Jerry on your podcast before. I probably have a complete collection of all his books, which is well over a dozen, but he was the master of message and in how to translate what we're trying to do well with buildings.

Michael ([07:02](#)):

And now you can actually do well with Bellin and translate that to a message that people would understand and would actually take up the idea and do it with their buildings. And so I just struck up a friendship with him over the years, and he's, I've just kind of watched how he's done things and his great way of approaching the market. And, and I would say really, I wanna give a shout out to my mom. She passed years ago, but, she said, stick to your convictions. When the whole room burst out laughing, when I was a senior in high school, trying to choose my profession and they burst out laughing at my choice in the early two thousands, I had peers in my industry and our industry, the design industry coming up to me and saying, you are ripping off your clients doing this green thing and my mom said, stick to your convictions. Stick to things, your ethics, your morals, listen to others, given their ability to say, but always stick to what you believe in. I think that's helped, helped me quite a lot. And I would say that to anybody else out there even though people are making fun about something or saying something nay-saying, if you really can prove it and do it, run with it, go with it, do it.

Charlie ([08:27](#)):

Oh, you had some amazing parents. So that's great. Thanks for giving a shout out to those mentors. Those that had influence on you. It sounded like the solar was kind of an early off on energy. You mentioned LEEDs sustainability. So at what point are you like, everything else I do from this point forward, and I got to go green building on this, no matter what, was there any other, or is it just, you got tested, tested

Michael ([08:52](#)):

By the time the early two thousands around and the then LEED USGBC was able to physician drain versus everybody off the coast, doing what they're doing. They organized it and created a program that people could

understand and participate in and learn from and get excited about. I think that's where we were able to take it to the next step. People are starting to be green. Now we can start talking about what we do today with our clients about being resilient, being sustainable energy, efficient, looking at maintenance issues and long term maintenance and deferred maintenance and blending, all of that. And then wellness of the people in the buildings themselves. Taking that as a blend and going forward with that versus just looking at green or energy efficient systems or green materials but that you look holistically now at how you do a building, especially with what we have going today with the pandemic and all those issues. Are we going to be in buildings much more or as much. Also, it's interesting where we go from here.

Charlie ([10:12](#)):

So that was about this career within HEAPY, you've had different roles, as I understand it 19, 20 years as the sustainability person within the firm and now a chief innovation officer. Can you tell us a little bit about evolution and your career within the company?

Michael ([10:29](#)):

It's interesting. When I started, I was an energy analyst and I said, if you're going to hire me full time, right out of college, I don't want to do design. I'm not interested. I want to do this as an energy analyst. And so about 10, 15 years later they said we have a design position open if you're interested. I was kind of worried that, "Oh my gosh, this is, this is going to be, they don't want this energy thing anymore in the nineties." I talked to them about it, and they said, no, no, no, no, we just have this. If you wanted it, we gave you this offer and then one of the senior principals took me aside and said, look, we do design. Your energy part is a very small part of the firm too, to get to know everything and be broad-based.

Michael ([11:15](#)):

You probably ought to take the design position. So I took his advice and took the design position, ended up loving design, led a healthcare design team for a number of years. In the early two thousands, I took over as a business development and marketing manager for the firm. That's the same time green came out in a big way. I was able to leverage my position to shift

HEAPY. We were always focused on energy back when Mr. HEAPY started the firm. I met him back in 1981 before he passed, but we were always focused on, but then LEED and USGBC was more across the entire spectrum of the building, not just the energy systems themselves. And so we're able to expand that. With my position and my desire and interest in being green, sustainable environmentally responsible, I was just a natural.

Michael ([12:16](#)):

And so we became one of the Midwest's top green design firms and have held that, and we've got several hundred LEED projects that are certified platinum and so forth and have done a great movement in the Midwest. Helping them move the industry to be more successful. And now we're next level with moving into the innovation position to lead us to what's next? What are we supposed to be doing next? We did the green. We're well along on that way. Now it's, as I mentioned before, holistically looking at the entire client's portfolio or their campus or their building, whatever it is to be, is it resilient? Is it sustainable and resilient? Is it energy efficient? Is it a great plan to make sure it keeps going the maintenance is taken care of? Is it holistically looking at the people in the building are they using the WELL standard and just rolling that all together. So we're looking at it from a complete picture of what the client is needing and that is fantastic.

Charlie ([13:25](#)):

As you look back, what are you really proud of? Some of those accomplishments that stand out.

Michael ([13:41](#)):

Well, In my career, if you're looking at it from a business development marketing position, that's taken in 2007, when the great recession happened, right? A lot of the design industry and construction industry was just laid off completely. HEAPY made a commitment, senior principals made a commitment that we were going to keep everybody as best we can. We ended up hiring through the entire recession from 2007 because we had such a green portfolio, the green projects didn't get canceled, everything else did because there was value in building green. We had great years through the recession, which was quite remarkable, but I really attribute that

to having positioned ourselves as being in the right, in the right market, doing the good projects, the environmentally responsible projects.

Charlie ([14:47](#)):

That's a great success story there. Yeah. I was working for Opus at the time. They were an early adopter of LEED and Mila laid off about 2000 people in 2008, early 2009. So it's really glad that you guys positioned yourself there and maintained as much as you could. So that's a huge accomplishment or highlight alone. What else stands out are any cool projects.

Michael ([15:08](#)):

Now also as innovation officer, we're working with clients on micro grids and solar and solar plus battery doing peak peak load shaving doing all sorts of unique building systems for the next, what do we do to the grid electrical grid in the country needing work and are there non wire alternatives that you could do that instead of just putting it on another substation, another set of transformers and another a hundred million dollars spent on big infrastructure things. Can we put a distributed energy resource at the end of the line here that can take up the need and replace it with renewable energy, replace it with a smarter system. So we're looking at smart buildings using building analytics to make our buildings smarter, where if you've got a college campus and there's 5,000 students that drive up in their electric cars, they all have batteries. Why don't we have a reverse battery charger where you've taken 5,000 kilowatt, a battery and use that to do demand load limiting instead of running an emergency generator or putting more carbon in the air. Those types of concepts are what we're working with clients to look at, how do you make best use of renewable energy and what's next in buildings.

Charlie ([16:39](#)):

And that is what's next. Smart grid, micro grid, what else stands out? , We're in the middle of a pandemic here as we're recording this, right. Michael, you mentioned WELL, and Fitwell. What else do you see around the corner we should be reading?

Michael ([16:55](#)):

Well, it really is now instead of just building how it was always built, it's looking at what do you need and what's the long term need behind it? How can you do differently outside of that box that we've always been in to where, if you plan this out well enough that the synergistic effects of it can give you an example of a client, a college campus and colleges are struggling right now. They had huge energy expenditure. We were able to put together a program that looked at deferred maintenance, it looked at their assets, the equipment assets on campus, deferred maintenance associated with that and energy efficiency, blend that all together, get it to all pay for itself and have a college campus of 1600 students spend \$4 million that was financed through the energy, the \$400,000 a year that they're saving on their energy bill. We rolled in a million dollars of deferred maintenance. They never were able to get to, and it all pays for itself and their upfront investment to us. The entire thing was 15,000.

Charlie ([18:15](#)):

That's a success story, you're right. You have to think farther out, right. Resiliency is kicking in, but you're right. That challenge, that status quo. Let's talk more about you. Do you have any good habits or best practices? What helps you really stay on point?

Michael ([18:31](#)):

Well, I think what I would suggest to folks, so the rituals or habits that you get into, don't get into them, don't make a habit of, I listened to the eighties music, that's all I do. One of my sister's college professors said don't be stagnant. I picked up skiing at age 45 and learned to play guitar at age 50 when my kid dropped the guitar idea when he was 16. It's always trying to learn something new and challenge yourself on all accounts, stay in shape, just work out. I hang around a lot of young folks in town. I lived downtown in the urban setting and it's great and invigorating. You listen to what they're talking about, what they see the future being because it's their future too. I read a lot. So get into some habit of always learning, always pushing yourself, do something better. We're all going to live to be 90. So either you're going to live healthy until you're 90, or you're going to slowly decline over the last many decades and that's not fun. Make sure you address all of that,

Charlie ([19:46](#)):

Constant learner there, I like that. Would you say you're best at what's your specialty or gift?

Michael ([19:52](#)):

Well, I guess this insatiable desire to learn, I'm always researching, always listening to some tech thing, webinars or some book that I'm reading. I asked questions, I can be known to ask the questions that nobody asks or are afraid to ask. I figure, we gotta get this out, let's talk this out. And then we can get to the core of what, whatever it is and everybody's happier because it's been addressed and it's not coming up six months later in a project or in life in general because you just swept it under the rug. So it's really, really just listening, learning and asking the good questions.

Charlie ([20:40](#)):

It seems like you're polished on those. A lot of us, you gotta slow down and be a great listener. You're right. Peel back the onion, ask those why questions of why we should feel like that. Right. Just slow down a little bit. That's what I'm also hearing here. Let's talk about bucket lists as we get to know each other more, I'm a fan of the bucket list. Are one or two things on your bucket list?

Michael ([21:03](#)):

I'm not a fan of a bucket list, but I like to relax and I like to relax in some good places. I'm intrigued by the eccentricity of Salvador Dali and more so about his adoration of his wife, Gala, because she's like, if you look in his work, she's almost in every single one of his paintings and a little picture and so going to Barcelona would obviously be on kind of that list. I collect glass because I'm from Toledo, the glass capital of the world and El Greco painted a view of Toledo, which was Toledo Spain, of course. So there's another, of course that painting is hanging in the Met and New York. But that also brings me to this Spanish kind of a saying Kind of trip that I've got to put together, but the glass collection gets me to Murano outside of Venice. I can go to the Glassworks on the Island there. So that would be really cool.

Charlie ([22:14](#)):

There's some great travel. It's amazing. I want to go back for a minute to the thinking, to the asking questions, to the staying curious do you consciously

block out time for yourself, time to think? I mean, we can get caught up as busy professionals right. Day to day. So can you maybe give us a glimpse? Are you dedicating a little bit of time every day towards this? How important is it for you? Can you speak to that for a minute? Sure.

Michael ([22:41](#)):

I did teach myself how to play guitar. I love music and that was a great thing that when my kid at age 16 said, dad, I no longer want to do this for me, six months ago and I'm staring at this. I'm like, well, maybe I could learn and I'm not that great, but I use that to relax. It's just 45 minutes an hour a day. I probably hit that good five days I walk, I live in the building that's attached to the performing arts center and us residents here have access to that. So I have this huge indoor space and I don't sleep much. I can get on for four hours of sleep easily. And so I have another 50% of the day compared to most people. I will walk in the winter garden and listen to books on audio while I'm walking. It's a way to just keep learning and listening. So those are probably things that I typically do to keep the mind going and the physical part. I cycle and also can listen to the music while I'm cycling

Charlie ([24:01](#)):

I just wanted to go back and ask, you've got a really healthy lifestyle there. It's definitely something that we all need to really focus on a little bit. I was talking about learning and books. I'm not sure if you'd like to listen to audio or if you like to pick up a hard copy in your hands, but is there a book or two you'd recommend?

Michael ([24:19](#)):

Yeah, I would go with a couple of top ones that I've recently been on, Be fearless by Gene Case. I mean, Jean Case started at AOL and it's about needing to take risks and don't fearing failure as an engineer. If we have less than 0.0, zero 1%, there are more than 0.0, zero one failures where you consider, we are a failure in business. If you fail only 40% of the time, you're quite successful. And so it's about, and she's also about impact investing. I've seen her present on impact investing, where you, you use your money to influence. We all have four ones or some investment or something that we have money set aside for future, but you're putting it in these companies.

Well, what about putting them in companies that support what you believe it and so make an impact with your money.

Michael ([25:14](#)):

And if enough, if you're talking environmental as enough, environmental folks say, I don't want to invest in carbon. My retirement fund that I've got set up does not invest in carbon. And that's why it's doing so I was actually positive for the year this year. It's getting, because those companies are doing the right thing. If they're going to do the right thing they're going to do well. Another book is, Four disciplines of execution, that 40 X book, Stephen Covey and folks, that's a good process book on how to organize your business and move it faster forward. If you really want a lot of exciting stories and a lot of Wars and a lot of conflict and morals pull up the Holy Bible and you're good, you're good with a lot of stories in that one, for sure. And a lot of guidance

Charlie ([26:13](#)):

We're going to put links to these books in the podcast show notes, and it's great. You have the Jerry Udallsin collection. That's a good one there to questions as we start to come to a close, Michael I'm sure there's a lot, what's one thing that stands out. What do you wish you'd known earlier?

Michael ([26:33](#)):

Being first year or first generation college, we were my brother and sisters and we all nine of us went off to college. We all paid for it, of course, but it's that really? We are leading for the rest of the family. I guess we should say, I wish someone would have just said jump in and do it because I had to learn that over a number of a number of years that could have accelerated, maybe getting more things done. I don't have any regrets. It's just that if someone just said, you can do it, go do it. Don't worry about failure, all those types of things. And that's what I would say to folks now, don't worry about failure. When Thomas Edison was asked, you've failed 10,000 times at doing a light bulb is like, well, I've just eliminated 10,000 ways that it's not going to work.

Michael ([27:28](#)):

He just looked at what he finally did. I am an architect, he died at a hundred, two years old last year, and I have a quote that's pasted on my monitor

along the bottom, it says, " the idea is to assign yourself responsibility for being a motivator and innovator." It would have been cool if someone just would have said, Hey, don't wait for somebody to do it.

Charlie ([28:01](#)):

Someone's listening right now, they're just now jumping into this green building movement. Any words of encouragement for them,

Michael ([28:09](#)):

Words of encouragement, this market is still ginormous. This the opportunity to help move the world, your community and your family forward by being green and by living green and by helping others to do that you will have a rewarding and impactful life. That's what we're all looking for. How can I be of impact? Being in the sustainability movement certainly is. It is a question answered.

Charlie ([28:44](#)):

I love it, man. What a great conversation we've had. I think even with your 40 plus year career, you're very useful. That's an observation here, but I even got investing advice from as long as I enjoy listening to talk, coming to us from Dayton, Ohio, chief innovation officer Michael, thank you so much. You're most welcome. Thanks for having me on.

Charlie ([29:09](#)):

I just want to say thank you to our loyal listeners. We actually are celebrating over one year here on the green building matters podcast, me and the entire team. We're stoked. And just so glad to continue to listen every Wednesday morning to a new interview with a green building professional here in this industry, or just some pro tips that we want to make sure that you are getting straight from us straight to you.

Charlie ([29:34](#)):

Thank you for listening to this episode of the green building matters projects@gbes.com. Our mission is to advance green building movement

Speaker 5 ([29:42](#)):

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