

## John Boyd, P.Eng.: Taking stock in diversity

by Susanne Frame

*A 25-year career with Golder Associates has taken John Boyd, P.Eng., around the globe. As vice president of operations, Boyd gives Engineering Dimensions a look at life working abroad and shares some tips on working in a cross-cultural company and industry.*

**Q. Please describe your role at Golder Associates.**

**A.** My job is to look after the aspects of our business that we operate centrally and to help my colleagues as a sort of in-house management consultant, where appropriate.

Golder is a truly global and somewhat unconventional company of about 2300 people. Unlike many large engineering firms, we have more than 80 permanent offices and operating companies in 18 countries. We have a virtual head office with only eight staff members. Our management style is cooperative rather than directive.

We are privately owned by the employees of the company—more than 800 own the core entity—and nobody has more than 1.5 per cent of the firm. It creates a collegial atmosphere in which all of our staff have a significant stake in the success of the company.

**Q. In which countries have you worked?**

**A.** I have worked as an engineer in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Turkey, Pakistan, Bolivia, South Africa, the United States and Canada. In my current role as an internal “management consultant,” you would have to add Brazil, Chile, Italy, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Hungary.



During a recent trip to Sweden, John Boyd (left) reviews drawings for a lock construction project with the project engineer. In his current role as an internal “management consultant,” he has worked in eight countries so far.

**Q. What do you like best about your job?**

**A.** I love to travel, meet people, explore new places and get insights into different cultures, which is just as well because I am away a great deal. It makes for a rather fragmented personal life, but fortunately I have a very understanding wife and family.

Even with the huge variety of cultures and languages encompassed by Golder Associates, I find all our people have common interests and very similar personalities. I can walk into any Golder office and feel at home almost immediately. It's the people who make the job so fascinating.

**Q. What are some of the challenges?**

**A.** The biggest challenge is always clarity—clarity of understanding and communication. While working outside your own culture, you quickly realize there are many approaches to accomplish a set objective. You have to open your mind to accept and understand alternatives. You also have to really work at communication, because you may think you understand what is

being said, but the message is almost always more complicated than you recognize.

**Q. What are some of the current growth areas for your firm internationally? Is demand on the rise for specific types of services?**

**A.** A lot of our clients are *Fortune 500* companies, who want integrated seamless service from their consultants. For example, they might want environmental cleanup assessments carried out on multiple sites in Budapest, Oslo and Stuttgart, to standards that not only look after local regulations, but are also understandable to staff in their head office in Chicago, and contribute to a set of documents intended for a financial institution in London. They want the product to include considerations of engineering, biology, toxicology and, where appropriate, sociology. The original work might be done in three or four different languages and reported in a fifth, and they want the report yesterday.

Increasingly today, we're providing integrated environmental services for large corporations. Tomorrow, I suspect their need for services related to sustainable development will drive our business.

**Q. What are some of the challenges involved in running a diverse, international operation?**

**A.** With Golder Associates getting bigger, and our industry becoming more complex and demanding an understanding of more and more disciplines, continuing education has become critical for our staff. A few years ago we started “Golder-U,” the name we give our continuing education process in the company. It's been a big hit with our staff, and I believe it's progressively lifting the level of performance of the company.

**Q. How do you deal with differences in engineering standards and practice?**

**A.** Our philosophy is to hire local staff trained at local universities and certified according to local standards. In this practice, Golder is different from many North American firms who take expatriate engineers with them on international projects. I think our approach works better—it leads to diversity, which is one of the core

values of the company. We all learn from one another.

**Q. What about linguistic and cultural differences?**

**A.** In practical terms, English is the universal language for business, so we work more in English than in any other language. In our European operations, the ability to speak more than one language is almost a fundamental requirement for recruitment. In many respects, we have learned a lot about multicultural operations from our European colleagues. They have coped with the language issue as a way of life for a long time.

Anyone planning to carry out international work would do well to make a conscious effort to study other languages and cultures. It's a lot easier to deal with a foreign assignment if you have some basic understanding of the culture you will be dealing with before you arrive.

**Q. How do you think globalization has affected the engineering profession?**

**A.** I have been attending FIDIC (International Federation of Consulting Engineers) conferences for several years. One of last year's sessions was organized around an exchange of views among firms of similar size on issues facing the industry. Seated around the table were representatives from China, Japan, Korea, Denmark, Germany, Canada, the U.S. and Egypt. With minor allowances for differences between companies, all of our issues were identical. Our planet has become very small, and our profession has relatively little mystique attached to it any more.

If Canadian engineers wish to remain a valuable resource in the global economy, we need to encourage the brightest of our students to study engineering by making the profession a rewarding career. We need to aggressively develop and use technology in our country, so those new engineers get to work on challenging projects. As engineers, we also need to speak out on issues on which we are experts, to contribute to society in a broader sense and raise the profile of the profession in this country. ♦