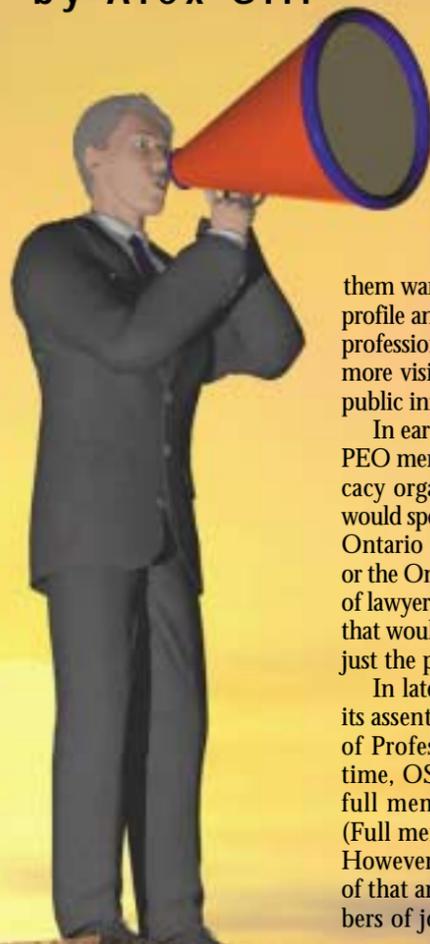


# Giving the "quiet" profession a voice

## New research supports work of advocacy organization taking a more vocal stand

by Alex Gill

The Ontario Society of Professional Engineers has developed its first strategic plan, the cornerstone of its work in the future. As a first step, a survey was commissioned to identify how engineers perceived themselves, how the public perceived them and what members thought the role of OSPE should be. That role, the survey showed, is to give the engineering profession greater presence, to enhance the profession's image and raise awareness of the role of the professional engineer. Members want the profession to be viewed in the same light as other top professions. The research and strategic plan helped to crystallize what the new organization needs to do to fulfil its members' wishes and thus become relevant and viable in their eyes.



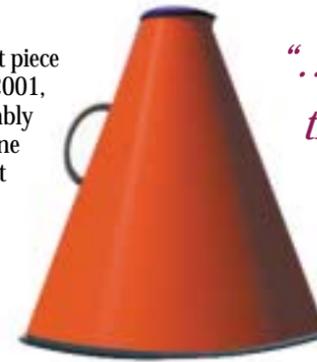
ospe

For the past several years, Ontario's professional engineers have been grappling with a key issue: Engineering is a large profession with more than 65 000 members licensed by PEO—highly trained members who perform an important public service. Many of them want the profession to have the same public profile and influence as medicine or law. Yet other professions are perceived to have higher status, a more visible public profile and a larger degree of public influence.

In early 2000 when a referendum vote among PEO members approved creating a separate advocacy organization, they envisioned a body that would speak up for engineers similar to the way the Ontario Medical Association represents doctors or the Ontario Bar Association advocates on behalf of lawyers. They wanted to create an organization that would promote the interests of engineers, not just the public interest.

In late 2000, the provincial government gave its assent to the creation of the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers (OSPE). Since that time, OSPE has been growing steadily, with its full membership topping 4000 by late 2001. (Full membership in OSPE costs \$80 annually. However, until 2004, PEO is contributing \$30 of that amount, bringing the cost to PEO members of joining this year and next to \$50.) The organization has also been busy establishing its infrastructure—setting up a website and member database, hiring a small number of staff and laying the foundation for its advocacy and profile-building role.

OSPE laid perhaps the biggest piece of this foundation in the fall of 2001, when its Annual General Assembly gathered as a "Committee of One Hundred" to help craft its first strategic plan. Led by OSPE's newly hired CEO, Randall Pearce, engineers from all over Ontario met at a Mississauga hotel on November 17 to discuss research findings on the status of the profession and to draft a plan to put an effective advocacy organization into motion.



*"...will engineers ever have the same status and respect as doctors and lawyers?"*

...speak out on issues that are relevant to the public interest, advising that this would be the quickest way to build trust and a positive reputation.

The OSPE strategic plan contains many initiatives related to advocacy. Most prominent among them is the suggestion that OSPE will identify an issue that will resonate with the public and with government but that will also showcase the contribution engineers can make to the public policy process. Such an issue would give the profession much-needed visibility in both media and government circles.

### Profession respected, but public still largely unaware

In addition to building professional engineering's profile at Queen's Park, OSPE's new strategic plan includes several initiatives that should make the profession more visible to the public. The survey research clearly demonstrated the need for such a campaign. While 56 per cent of the public respondents said they respect engineers (just after doctors and pharmacists), they know little about what happens day-to-day in the profession. Over one-half of respondents said that engineers primarily did "building and construction" work.

### Research key to good planning

The work that led to the strategic planning session actually began months before, when OSPE hired independent research firm Ipsos-Reid to help determine the major issues facing the profession. Specifically, OSPE needed to know how the engineering profession was perceived by engineers themselves, as well as by the public, students, journalists and government officials.

Ipsos-Reid targeted all these groups with a variety of methods. First, the firm conducted 11 focus groups with engineers and students across the province. The issues mentioned in the focus groups became the basis of questions that Ipsos-Reid asked in a number of other surveys, including a poll of 1000 Ontarians about public perceptions of engineering. Personal interviews with 30 government decision makers and journalists gave the research firm an idea of what so-called "opinion leaders" had to say. Finally, and most importantly, almost 4000 of the province's engineers gave their input into the process through a detailed email survey.

Ipsos-Reid presented the results of its research to the Committee of One Hundred at OSPE's General Assembly. Committee members discussed the findings in small groups and proposed solutions that became input for the strategic plan.

Here are just a few trends that Ipsos-Reid identified and some of the initiatives OSPE will be pursuing to address them.

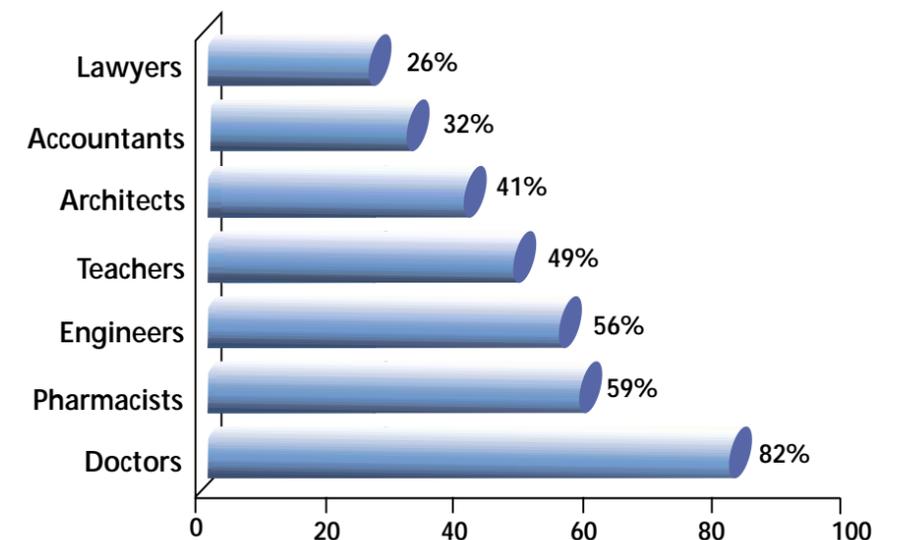
### Advocacy is important

The desire for a vocal organization to "put engineering on the map," as one respondent said, came through loud and clear in the research. The number one goal of professional engineers (identified by 80

per cent of respondents to the membership survey) was to "increase public appreciation and recognition of the value of engineering and engineers." A majority of engineers also wanted OSPE to represent the views of the profession to government ministries, be present at public inquiries and to "make statements to the media on major issues that involve engineering." Speaking in focus groups, engineers added that they expect OSPE to champion the concerns of engineers with PEO, as well as externally.

Interviews with prominent journalists and government officials revealed that they would be receptive to lobbying and profile-raising on behalf of professional engineers. While they characterized engineering as the "quiet" profession, they were open to the idea of engineers becoming more vocal. Journalists and government officials said the profession should

"...rate the following professions in terms of their status in society..."



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According to Ipsos-Reid researchers, a typical oral response was that engineers “build bridges, don’t they?”

The general lack of public knowledge of the breadth of the profession was reflected in a lack of awareness and understanding of the P.Eng. designation as indicative of licensure. Only one in four Ontarians surveyed (25 per cent) could name the licence for professional engineers, although this number rose to 43 per cent if the respondent had attended university.

From these results, it’s clear that there is an opportunity for OSPE to educate the public about the profession and the people who practise it. Over the coming months and years, OSPE will reach out to the public in an effort to give the profession a higher profile. The strategic plan proposes to make it easier for people—in particular students—to learn about the profession by improving OSPE’s website, among other initiatives. More work with the media, especially getting engineers to speak as technical experts on public policy issues, will also help OSPE’s education efforts.

**Career services give engineers an edge**

A majority of the engineers surveyed said they wanted OSPE to deliver career-related resources, such as training and on-line job postings, to help them manage and improve their own careers.

Over 70 per cent were interested in OSPE-sponsored continuing education on technical issues, while large numbers also mentioned business skills, such as “project management and accounting” (66 per cent of respondents interested) and “conflict

wanted their membership in OSPE to have a more immediate personal benefit. Engineers wanted OSPE to use its clout to help them receive lower rates on products and services related to their personal and professional lives. Over two-thirds (69 per cent) of the engineers surveyed, for example, were interested in “discounts on electronic and computer products,” while large numbers also wanted better insurance rates (66 per cent) and discounts on technical publications (61 per cent).

OSPE’s strategic plan proposes to meet this need through an innovative program called “EngineersFirst.” The program would use OSPE’s large membership to negotiate preferential rates with suppliers of engineering-related products and services. While the plan notes that there are many organizations serving engineers, OSPE aspires to offer the greatest selection of prod-

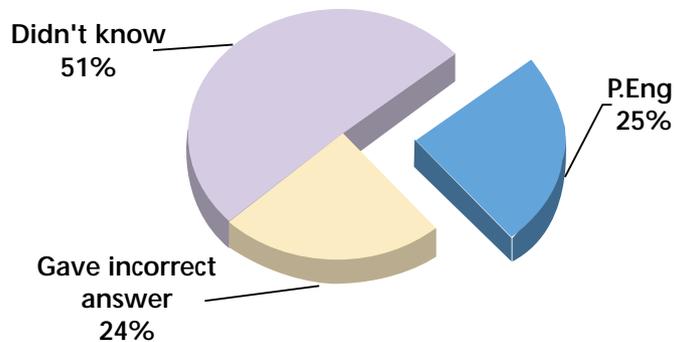
ucts and services at the most competitive prices. Members would participate in the program entirely through the OSPE website, allowing 24-hour, convenient access.

**Where we go from here**

One thing that OSPE’s new strategic plan makes clear is that there are many organizations making up the engineering profession in Ontario. In the words of OSPE’s CEO Pearce: “None of us is alone. We will need to work together if we are to succeed. We will continue to work with PEO and the many other engineering bodies in the months and years ahead. We need to, it’s a big job.”

**Alex Gill is OSPE’s associate director, public affairs. To join OSPE, visit [www.ospe.on.ca](http://www.ospe.on.ca).**

**“...What specific designation or title do licensed professional engineers have...?”**



resolution and career development” (62 per cent interested). Moreover, while many respondents wanted training delivered in a traditional classroom setting, one-third wanted courses to be available over the Internet.

OSPE began to meet this need for career help when it launched its on-line Career Centre in the fall of 2001. The centre, located at [www.ospe.on.ca](http://www.ospe.on.ca), lists job postings from hundreds of different employers and is visited by more than 200 engineers every day. In the coming months and years, according to the plan, OSPE will expand the career assistance it offers to members.

**Numbers count in affinity programs**

While the survey showed that engineers were supportive of OSPE’s advocacy role, they also

