PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Is competence an issue?

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President

PEO is virtually alone among the provincial engineering licensing bodies in not introducing either voluntary or mandatory requirements for reporting and measuring of the competence of its members. There are conflicting views as to the need, desirability or meaningfulness of proceeding along these lines.

In 1989, George Piper, who was then the PEO President was quoted in *Engineering Dimensions* in the following terms:

"...as George sees it, the issue is not so much whether practising engineers remain current (since he believes a competitive marketplace ensures that they do) as it is how to document that they are current."

The article went on to report his additional comment that "so far we haven't discovered how to illustrate that engineers are current without creating an administrative monster."

In 1993, President Jane Phillips spoke of a softer approach with PEO encouraging its members to keep up as being "the only practical response given the incredible variety of areas in which engineers practise."

However, only four years later PEO members were confronted with proposals for a plan that required mandatory reporting of professional development activities to demonstrate continuing competence. This move resulted in vigorous opposition and those initiatives were pushed aside in the resulting turmoil. Subsequently, voluntary reporting was introduced through the Professional Profile form.

Now it appears Council may be revisiting this issue once again.

While it is not clear whether the early initiatives originated with the 1980 report of the Professional Organizations Committee, (POC) the question posed in that report articulates the dilemma clearly:

"The self-regulating licensing regimes in the accounting, architectural, engineering, and legal professions confer exclusive rights to practice on individuals who have met the prescribed entry qualifications. Given an appropriate set of entry qualifications, the question then becomes, 'Is this sufficient assurance to the public that only competently executed services will be rendered by service providers in these areas?' "

It also warned that:

"No system of regulation, either entry regulation, post-entry regulation, or some combination of the two, will ever be error-free in the sense that the public can expect never to encounter a competence problem. To design a regulatory system with this as its objective would entail huge administrative costs."

However, it is a later observation that should give us pause to think:

"In order to evaluate the appropriate roles of the various regulatory instruments that are available, an understanding of what is embraced by the concept of 'competence' must be settled. Professor Barry Reiter, in a working paper prepared for us, states:

'The range of components properly included within a definition of a professional's 'continuing competence' – competence retained after entry into the profession and throughout its practice–might be narrowly or widely circumscribed.' "

Quite clearly, this proposition is entirely inappropriate to the engineering profession if it is to be understood that competence is measured against entrance requirements.

In fact, engineers continually build on their knowledge. In my view, engineers at the time they attain their P.Eng. licences are only at an entry level to the profession and continue to learn and to develop through their careers, until they are able to take full professional responsibility either in directing a team or as independent practitioners in a particular field. In either of those instances, they will have built upon their early training and here, I would remark, just as I would not expect a junior engineer to be put in charge of a major project, neither would I expect a senior engineer to necessarily be doing detailed design.

The significant element in the careers of most engineers is that of change. We tend to advance or to change our responsibilities based on direct work experience. Our advancement is achieved through the judgment of our abilities (our competence) made by others, be they employers or clients. Our duties change accordingly.

Generally speaking, the career path for large numbers of our profession is a continuum. Indeed, Dr. Phillip Lapp in his 1972 study entitled *The Ring of Iron* reported that within 10 years over two thirds of engineering graduates were in supervisory, management or executive positions. An examination of those PEO salary surveys where years of experience are reported along with levels of responsibility shows that the same pattern continues to be experienced.

It is ironic that in the jurisdictions that have decided on programs that supposedly measure continuing competence, the measurement is really of continuing professional development (CPD). This, alone, illustrates the points made above, and while engineers might resent or balk at a reporting exercise, no engineer will argue that CPD is not desirable or necessary. It is second nature to us; for the most part it forms an integral part of our professional lives.

However, the outrage at the earlier proposals for mandatory reporting was no doubt, in part, due to a perception that a

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