



Animating members to a greater governance role

BY MICHAEL MASTROMATTEO

In the study of political science and public administration, a basic lesson is that members of a community learn to participate by participating. And the participation of constituents in decision making results in greater accountability and better governance by the decision-making authority.

For Ontario's engineering community, the way most participate in the governance of their profession is through exercising their vote in PEO's annual Council elections. Voter turnout in elections is generally seen as a baseline measure of the interest and relevance constituents hold for their governing structure. And although voter turnout alone doesn't tell the whole story of the health of a system or organization, it gives some indication of constituents' attitudes toward the governance process.

PEO participation middling

In a recent comparative analysis, the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) studied the election processes and voter turnout patterns among several regulated professions in Ontario, Canada and internationally.

PEO appears to be in the middle of the pack in its voter turnout. For example, PEO averages 16 to 18 per cent voter turnout (approximately 12,000 of 70,000 eligible voters) for Council elections. This is lower than the Law Society of Upper Canada (35 per cent average voter turnout), the Ontario Association of Architects (24 per cent voter turnout), and the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (30 to 35 per cent voter turnout), but is higher than the OCT—the sponsor of the voter study—which averages only 5.5 per cent turnout for its elections.

The OCT voter turnout survey also noted that one to two PEO Council positions are typically decided by acclamation each year, indicative to some of a lack of interested or suitable candidates from some areas. Democratic organizations are generally troubled by acclamations, which deny voters a choice of representation.

Asked by the OCT whether voter-members feel “empowered” through the election process, PEO said some engineers may feel “unrealistically empowered” as a result of some candidates campaigning on platforms they would not actually have the authority or means to implement, were they elected to PEO Council.

PEO, like other regulators, is not considering offering incentives for members to vote in elections, but has recently amended Regulation 941/90 to enable new election and search committees to encourage members to collect the necessary signatures to stand for election to Council.

Fresh ideas wanted

Certainly volunteer work, with any of PEO’s more than 20 committees, provides an important and valuable means to tap into the energy and experience of membership with the aim of more effective regulation. As well, the chapter system

encourages member activity at the local level, and often serves as a training ground for future Councillors.

However, this means that a group of no more than 700 volunteers—the members of Council, committees, task forces, and the chapter system—undertake much of PEO’s policy and priority-setting activities.

Past PEO President Bob Goodings, P.Eng., has long advocated the importance of new blood for Council and committee work as a key step in making the regulator more relevant to members, the provincial government and the public at large. And while Goodings salutes

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the interest and commitment of volunteers with long records of service on Council or committees, he believes the time is ripe to encourage a raft of new volunteers to come to the governance fore.

“We have to dispel the notion that there are limited avenues for service to the profession, or that standing for election as a PEO Council member is the only real way to serve,” Goodings said in an interview.

At the same time, Goodings says, he believes those rising through the volunteer ranks within PEO often gain valuable personal and professional experience from serving on Council, particularly in the areas of teamwork, consensus building and effective governance.

George Comrie, P.Eng., another former PEO President, agrees there is a perception among membership that the same cadre of veteran volunteers continues to dominate governance and policy making activity at PEO, but that, in fact, new volunteer talent is always welcome.

Comrie said that, in his opinion, the best Council and committee composition would involve a mix of experienced volunteers and younger members who would bring more up-to-date work experience to the table.

“The practice of PEO recycling the same Councillors time after time is not an ideal situation,” Comrie said. “The idea is that anyone should be able to step up to the plate and offer their talents for the betterment of the profession, but you’ve got to balance that enthusiasm with the need to develop experience.”

Goodings and Comrie said that changing the perception that Council work is especially onerous and time-consuming would pay dividends in recruiting new talent. But, dispelling this notion might require Council to make the best use of its meetings, to continue efforts to publicize and promote governance initiatives, and to improve communications between the regulator and membership at large.

The recognized value of bringing fresh perspectives to the PEO Council and committee talent pool was among the reasons for establishing the Governance Task Force in 2001. PEO President-elect David Adams, P.Eng., chaired the task force, which was stood down only part way through a massive mandate. Adams agreed that member activism in service to PEO was one of the more subtle objectives of the task force.

“This examination of governance issues was important, because one of the items on the agenda was to break up the log-jam of having the same members on committees for ever and ever, and no new people coming in,” Adams said. “And that is now stated clearly in our governance handbook and committees and task forces policy that there is to be a turnover every so many years and a turnover of the chair, and so on, which is more in line with good governance.”

Ultimately, however, it’s up to each PEO member to feel the need to take a more active role in the organization. By remaining attuned to how it gets things done, and monitoring the experiences of other self-regulated professions, PEO hopes to develop best governance practices that will inspire members to go from passive observers to active participants.

In their own **WORDS—** what **COUNCIL** means

By **MICHAEL MASTROMATTEO**

Because PEO Council is central to the governance and effective regulation of the engineering profession, *Engineering Dimensions* invited several Councillors to comment on its importance.



Rakesh Shrewastav, P.Eng.

I serve on PEO Council and take part in committee work because of my great passion for the profession. It has been a rewarding experience to be part of policy decision making and I encourage PEO members at large in the chapter system to get more involved. Having a great motivation for change and by actively participating, I also see my involvement as a tremendous

opportunity for professional development and personal growth. In addition to the interesting challenges, this has also been an enormous opportunity to learn and to serve not only the profession, but also the people of Ontario by working harmoniously together with other Councillors for such a great organization, whose mission is always to protect the interests of the public.



Cathy Redden

Having served for over a decade on municipal council, I was familiar with the governance structure used by PEO, and welcomed the opportunity to become involved with another organization aimed at serving and protecting the public interest. Working with a wide variety of individuals in various decision-making

roles has afforded me the chance to witness first-hand how engineers analyze problems and develop suitable policies to address them. The opportunity to work on “the other side” of the decision-making table is one that all members of the profession should experience at one time or another.



Peter DeVita, P.Eng.

It is crucial for members of a self-regulating authority such as PEO to be involved with the peer review and governing functions through the member committees. Without such activity, PEO would cease to exist. These tasks were created in order to protect and serve the public interest. However, they also serve to structure the profession itself by providing a means for collective action. The engineering profession is more needy than the others in this respect due to the ever expanding new science and tech-

nology...To give proper meaning to the licence, such new areas of practice require definition and establishment of new exclusive rights to practise. Only engineers who actually do such work will understand it in enough detail to be able to effect such additions...Hence, members are particularly needed in these newer areas so that the engineering profession can exercise proper public protection and serve its interests in these new areas.



James Lee, PhD, P.Eng.

I wanted to share my expertise and experience in post-secondary education to serve the profession. Academics pervade much of what professional engineers do, directly or indirectly. All of us have gone through a rigorous university or examination program to get to where we are, and academic assessments are also a core component of PEO's

licensure process. I've tried to ensure that Council is fully informed about academic-related issues in the engineering profession. So far, my involvement with PEO has been very stimulating and offers a broader dimension outside of my normal line of work; it's been immensely rewarding.



Corneliu Chisu, P.Eng.

[PEO] members' involvement in the governance of the profession is paramount in these times when we notice a rapid evolution and diversification of the

engineering profession. It is our duty to be involved in the governance of our association in order to keep it [relevant] in better serving the public. 