

Lending foreign-trained engineers a helping hand

by Karen Hawthorne

Max Perera, P. Eng., knows what it's like to face the uncertainty of coming to a new country, adjusting to cultural and linguistic differences and finding a good job. He was a respected "chartered" mechanical engineer in Sri Lanka, in charge of base workshops for the defence corps of army, navy and air force troops. But when he came to Canada, he couldn't find a job in his field, so he decided to become a civil engineer.

Now the retired head of capital planning for Ontario's Ministry of Transportation would like to see more support and education for foreign-trained engineers coming to Canada. He speaks from his experience as a foreign-trained applicant for licensure with PEO, and his current post as PEO Councillor.

"There's a message to be conveyed to potential immigrants to prepare them for regulation of the profession here in Canada," Perera says, adding that there have been several grievances over the years directed at PEO by applicants who do not meet licensing requirements. "These grievances question the fairness—the way the rules and processes seem to work against some ethnic communities."

Calling for a new appeals process

Currently, when applicants make formal complaints to PEO, the association's Complaints Review Councillor reviews their files to ensure they have been treated according to approved admissions policies and procedures. Such reviews of decisions in dispute are on process grounds only.

The length of time it takes to assess the qualifications of foreign applicants is often perceived to be problematic. Another issue is the perceived need for a new, arm's-length appeals process for applicants assigned examinations (other than the Professional Practice Examination) under PEO's admissions process. Both are currently the subject of PEO investigation. Perera sits on the joint PEO/Coalition for Access to Professional Engineering (CAPE) Task Force, which was formed in 1997 to review the association's admissions process to ensure that it is fair for all applicants. A draft of an arm's-length appeals process—based on best practice elements from other jurisdictions and principles of fairness and equity—is in the works, and is scheduled to be presented for Council's approval in February.

"The engineering profession as a whole, especially in Ontario, has a good story to tell. We have bent over backwards to make it relatively easy for immigrants to get back into the practice of professional engineering, without compromising our standards and the regulatory requirement to govern the profession in the public interest," Perera says. "The policies we have adopted, and the procedures we have set up at PEO are, I believe, truly remarkable. They are under review to make them even better."

Making sense of licensure requirements

Perera points out the need for foreign-trained engineers to be aware of the requirements for licensure in Canada and the process involved. Foreign-trained engineers planning to immigrate to Canada usually undergo an informal assessment by the Canadian Council of Professional Engineers (CCPE) to determine the likely outcome of the potential immigrant's application for licensure to one of the provincial or territorial engineering associations. But, as Perera points out, documentation from Immigration

Canada does not clarify that even those who have received positive assessments from CCPE may be required by provincial and territorial licensing bodies to write some examinations.

In Ontario, the situation is that you can do engineering work without a licence, so long as a professional engineer takes responsibility for that work. But you cannot practise in the sense of taking responsibility without a licence—and you cannot hang your shingle and offer engineering services unless you're licensed and hold a Certificate of Authorization.

Confusion is compounded by the stress of relocating—adapting to a new environment, climate, culture and so on. Again, he says, cultural differences may create misconceptions. For example, in many countries, once the government says you are approved for landed status as an engineer, you are permitted to practise, and there are no further steps to take.

Video training

Subject to funding from the government and private sector, ShadowCatcher Productions of Toronto, an independent video production company, plans to develop a video training series to assist foreign-trained engineers and other professionals in their search for suitable employment and licensure in Canada. The company has formed an advisory committee with a cross-section of representatives, including Perera from PEO, and others from large companies, high-tech companies, banks, other licensing bodies and community resource groups from across Ontario.

Called "Access Power—Focus on Solutions," the four-part video series will explore realistic paths to success for foreign-trained immigrants and refugees. To be made available through community support groups and Canadian consulates around the world, it will profile role models, provide strategies based on actual case studies, and outline the assistance for immigrants provided by licensing bodies, community groups, academic institutions and labour organizations. PEO was invited to participate on the advisory committee for the series because of the positive way in which it works with community organizations for foreign-trained engineers.

ShadowCatcher has also proposed a study guide for the series, explaining how to use the programs in workshops. It plans to launch the series next fall at a national conference on access to professions and trades for new immigrants and refugees.

Perera calls the videos "a landmark project that will provide valuable information and be relevant for the next decade or so."

ShadowCatcher is asking for suggestions for professional role models and success stories to include in the series. For more information, contact ShadowCatcher Productions at (416) 483-9492. ♦

