

Refocusing PEO



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President

In this column, my first as your President, I will talk about how the creation of the new Ontario Society of Professional Engineers (OSPE) is driving PEO to refocus on its regulatory role at a time when the engineering licence is losing meaning. What I have to say about the profession's current state may make some readers uncomfortable; some may even be upset. In all cases, I urge you to take action by writing letters to the editor, posting messages on the Members' Forum of PEO's website, joining a PEO committee, or getting involved with your chapter. It's time for engineers "to do."

OSPE on the way

With over 80 per cent of members who voted in the advocacy referendum voting in support of OSPE's creation, in the largest turnout in recent years, members have given Council a strong signal for change. On April 14, the OSPE was formally incorporated by the five initial directors chosen by PEO Council and the Canadian Society for Professional Engineers' (CSPE) board of directors.

A member-interest body requires the interest of the members. Check out the enclosure in this issue and join—it is in your interest.

As OSPE comes into being, PEO will need to do some serious rethinking. I believe this can best be accomplished by going back to first principles, a solid engineering approach. For example, what do we mean by an engineering licence? What is the "right to practise" or the "right to title" about?

Metamorphosis in creating a licensing body

In Canada, the creation of a new profession generally has three steps, which typically occur over several decades. These are:

1. the formation of a members' interest association; this formalized group can now lobby on behalf of its members;
2. obtaining a right to title; this exclusive title adds prestige to belonging to the association and contributes to membership growth; and
3. obtaining a right to practise; this is a unique Canadian system in which provincial governments grant the exclusive right to practise a professional occupation, which is conferred through the issuing of a licence.

Moving from step "2" to "3" is like a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly. Though one may have grown from the other, these creatures are very different.

An exclusive right to practise is essentially a monopoly. Our government is not in the business of granting monopolies for special interests. They will only do this if there is a greater common good to be served. In other words, the issuing of a licence can only be justified if the public at large will be better served and protected by doing so.

Originally established in 1922 to further engineers' interests, PEO has been stuck getting out of the cocoon. In taking on this role, OSPE can enable PEO to become the "butterfly" that it was meant to be, typically named as a "college," not an association. It has only taken us about seven decades!

Taking care of core business

OSPE's emergence will create challenges and opportunities for PEO in refocusing on its core regulatory role.

The first Professional Engineers Act in 1922 granted engineers only the right to title. In 1937, the new Professional Engineer's Act was about the right to practise or licensing. Collapsing bridges of the 1930s convinced governments that the public was indeed put at risk when poorly

skilled practitioners practised engineering.

However, telling today's software engineers they have the exclusive right to design bridges is not very useful—for either the engineers or the public. Yet, engineers in many non-traditional or emerging fields today must manage similar risks to the public as those working in the traditional areas.

So, do all modern engineering fields have exclusive scopes of practice conferred with their licence?

In 1998, the Canadian Council of Professional Engineers (CCPE) published some long awaited statistics, based on a 1997 survey of over 41,000 engineers across Canada. Almost 32 per cent of respondents said their licence was essential to their practice. If we accept the survey as statistically valid, we can conclude that over two-thirds of licensed professional engineers believe they do not need a licence to do their work.

The survey also found that only about 60 per cent of engineering students become licensed professional engineers. In the high-tech areas, this number was about 40 per cent. Put together, the survey results mean that, whether licensed or not, about 80 per cent of our graduate engineers do not have an exclusive scope of practice. I find this very upsetting. You should too. I want to do something about this state of affairs, and I hope others in the profession feel the same way.

In future articles, I'll explore these issues further and relate what PEO is doing about them, and what you can do.

As President, I can only aim the spotlight on our profession's fundamental issues. It is up to you, the members/licensees in practice, the professors in faculties of engineering and our engineering students to address the countless details that, in the end, give real value to the engineering licence. ♦