

# VOLUNTEERING

taking on new meaning for PEO



Ontario's engineering regulator has long recognized the contributions of volunteers to its operations. Only recently, however, has volunteering been seen as the path to PEO leadership and more effective governance and self-regulation.

*By Michael Mastromatteo*



Chapters or committees?

An emerging question facing civic-minded engineers today centres on where to get the most bang for their volunteering hours.

A key principle underlying the volunteering imperative for the regulator is a desire for members to exercise initiative and personal leadership in governing the profession to put the “self” back into self-regulation.

It's a challenge common to all self-regulating professions striving to make themselves more relevant to members at large.

And while the experience and discretion of long-serving volunteers is always welcome, there is a hope of bringing new blood into committee, chapter and governing council ranks.

But at least one former PEO president feels there is limited opportunity for new volunteers at the committee level, and especially on council. So, what about chapters as the ideal way to support the profession?

Prior to becoming president in 2004-2005, George Comrie, P.Eng., acknowledged the importance of volunteerism and succession planning to the future of PEO. “PEO's governance model relies primarily on volunteers from within the profession who give of their time, energy and leadership abilities to serve on PEO chapter executives, committees, task forces and council,” Comrie says. “The quality of our self-governance and our ability to maintain the public trust depend on our ability to attract and develop competent, committed leaders—and to retain them—over time.”

Traditionally, PEO volunteers first become involved at the chapter level, and then proceed to work on a PEO standing committee. In fact, the chapters are overseen by the Regional Councillors Committee, which has a mandate to provide leadership (and leaders) to the PEO executive. Toward this end, the chapters are being used more and more in the consultation and peer review phases of PEO policy development through items brought to the thrice-yearly regional congresses, a meeting of chapter chairs and vice chairs.

Recruiting volunteers through the chapter system, however, can be a double-edged sword for the chapters themselves, for

as volunteers gain experience and confidence at the chapter level and advance to committee and even council positions, they have less and less time to devote to chapter activities.

At an October 2009 conference dedicated to policy-making and corporate governance, PEO officials and leaders of other regulatory associations discussed strategies to more effectively engage licensed members in the work of their associations. Much of the discussion centred on open communication between association and member as a means of making regulatory affairs continually relevant. Conference participants were also advised that diversity among volunteers, executives and policy-makers invariably leads to better decision making and governance effectiveness.

**SLOW TURNOVER**

While it's been suggested that the traditional route for a PEO volunteer begins at the chapter, proceeds to a “head office” standing committee, then election to PEO council, finally culminating in an appointment to Engineers Canada, it doesn't fully describe reality or address the potential problem of too many would-be volunteers vying for too few committee and council positions, reflected in a relatively slow turnover of council and committee members.

About 300 people—PEO members and some non-members—serve on 30 committees and task forces. Another 400 or so make up the boards of the 36 chapters, with another 29 on PEO council. With some of them wearing several hats as members of both committees and council, or chapter boards and committees, fewer than 1000 people are involved in the governance, policy-making and administrative operation of Ontario's 73,000 professional engineers.

Former PEO president Bob Goodings, P.Eng., thinks this relatively small pool of volunteers carrying the bulk of the load at PEO is a cause for concern. With his past work including terms on PEO's Central Election and Search Committee, he says he has an appreciation for the new ideas put forward by would-be council members, and believes the regu-



lator should do more to encourage volunteerism and succession planning at all levels.

“PEO should consider dragging people from the membership to get more involved in PEO operations and governance,” Goodings says. “This might help overcome what some see as a stagnant committee system, and a limited opportunity to stand for council, which for a long time was composed largely of incumbents.”

While Goodings sees the committee system as the optimal way for rank and file engineers to become more involved in governing their profession, he also says chapters can be better used as a training ground for the next generation of executives.

“I’d like to see the chapters eventually become a pressure group to PEO council,” Goodings says, “not only to bring ideas forward, but to reflect members’ priorities and, ultimately, to provide future leaders.”

In some cases, people serving on PEO committees do go on to serve on council. Often, these same people have progressed through the chapter system and, in a sense, have gone through a period of engineering “politicization.”

Goodings says that while not every licensed engineer will have a strong desire to get involved in governing the profession, there are clear benefits to those choosing to become involved.

In his own case, Goodings points out that he had very little to do with PEO governance for the first four decades of his engineering career. It was only after getting involved with certain

committees that he recognized the benefits of volunteerism, both to the profession and to himself.

“I had nothing to do with engineering governance for the first 45 years of my career,” he says, “and I’m assuming that the majority of our members feel pretty much the same way. But there is true value for those who choose to get involved.”

Goodings suggests the chapter system hasn’t necessarily been fertile ground for PEO leadership, noting that there are as many committee members who have never been involved in their chapters as there are those who have come up from the grassroots. His belief is that the committee system, rather than the chapters, is actually the wellspring of PEO’s leadership.

### SUCCESSION PLANS

At the same time, Goodings says he would like to see the chapter system push PEO to ensure that some of their most suitable members are recruited to serve on committees with a view to eventually serving on council. He would also encourage chapter chairs to push for succession plans at the local chapter level, believing such a succession plan would bring some continuity of leadership and priority setting at chapters, and presumably to PEO as a whole.

“If we don’t start adding members to committees and encouraging them to take their term as chair, and then on to council, we won’t see any change to this apparent lack of interest in PEO council, outside of chapters,” Goodings says.

The former president’s interest in stirring up more interest in engineering governance among far-flung PEO members is being addressed on a number of levels.

For example, PEO Chapter Manager Matthew Ng, P.Eng., reports leadership training is now underway in the chapter system. This training focuses largely on facilitating ways chapters can bring ideas forward to council. Training is also aimed at developing leaders who will bring chapter experience to the committee and council tables.

The grassroots component of PEO’s Government Liaison Program (GLP), based in the chapters, allows volunteers to get involved in PEO’s efforts to raise awareness of the benefits of engineering self-regulation with government. It’s conceivable some engineers, spurred to action by way of the GLP, could become politicized for further involvement with the regulator.

PEO’s Advisory Committee on Volunteers (ACV), in conjunction with the regulator’s governance and culture department, is now assessing the full human resource needs of the entire committee system. It’s part of an evolving volunteer human resources plan focused primarily on identifying committee needs and finding new recruits to take on committee work.

On March 30, the ACV hosted a committee chairs workshop to further assess the staffing and succession planning needs of PEO’s standing committees. Paul Ballantyne, P.Eng., a PEO councillor and ACV chair, hosted the workshop and struck an optimistic note for potential committee members and volunteers.

“There are lots of volunteers out there,” Ballantyne said. “They’re at the gate and just waiting to come in and make their contribution.”

In a later interview with *Engineering Dimensions*, Ballantyne agreed volunteering at the chapter and committee levels is the traditional path to activism for Ontario engineers.

### ENTRY LEVEL

“The chapter system really provides a valuable entry-level role for volunteers,” Ballantyne says. “It provides the opportunity to be the local presence for the profession. The chapters also provide a vital communication link to members, potential members, and the public. It presents an important outreach role to the local community and more recently to politicians through the GLP initiative.”

Ballantyne says chapter involvement provides a solid introduction to PEO operations and its regulatory role. In most cases, this period of formation can prove invaluable to members at large, he says. Simply earning an engineering degree and obtaining a licence, Ballantyne says, doesn’t necessarily mean an individual understands or appreciates the role of PEO and the value of self-regulation. But by becoming involved with a chapter, these issues, plus a host of related regulatory and licensing questions, take on greater significance.

Despite the growing connection between volunteerism and self-governance, however, Ballantyne believes more needs to be done. “I think volunteering is undervalued by both the members and PEO council/administration,” he suggests. “There are many P.Engs who don’t get involved. They get their licence and work the lifestyle, putting effort maybe into other pursuits, or volunteering for other non-engineering groups. I also think that the benefits of volunteering for either chapters or committees are undervalued. There are many benefits in personal development and satisfaction that just don’t seem to make it in the summary of the benefits. This is one reason that the Advisory Committee on Volunteers is trying to promote the recognition of the volunteer through a recognition program.”

In PEO’s Committees and Task Forces Policy, approved by PEO council in September 2008, the regulator recognizes committee volunteerism as an expression of “broad engagement and participation of PEO members” and as a way of supporting development of “future PEO leaders.” The policy recognizes that members deserve opportunities for volunteer learning and leadership development, and that a “broadened volunteer engagement” brings benefits both to PEO and individual volunteers.

“If we strengthen the relevance of the profession, we will automatically increase the interest in volunteering and participating in the local chapter activities,” says Ballantyne. “This will support an upward spiral in the level of involvement of members and support from employers. Once members participate at the chapter level, the progress to committees and council will follow.”

There may be no clear answer to the question of chapters versus committees being the best path to a more fulsome involvement with PEO and engineering self-governance. The chapters remain the natural catchment area for would-be



volunteers, but they don’t necessarily guarantee a progression to committees or council.

Yet with any volunteer-supported enterprise, much depends on the individual. Those with a disposition to service and involvement are more likely to heed the profession’s appeal for support. Sometimes all it takes is an invitation to get involved.

The challenge for PEO may be to demonstrate more effectively the benefits of volunteerism, leadership potential and more effective governance. But for Ballantyne and others, it’s worth getting involved sooner or later. “Ultimately, involvement at one or both levels—chapters or committees—better prepares an individual to run for council,” he says. “I see this as the more global succession planning that is available for members, not just the local committee or chapter succession planning to fill the roster and allow members to move from position to position and not get stuck in one.” Σ