



by Peter M. DeVita, P.Eng.
President

In his book *Death of the Guilds: Professions, States and the Advance of Capitalism, 1930 to the Present*, Elliot Krause makes some harsh points. He argues that, as a result of capitalism, the major professions have become dominated by employees, who are subject to the rule of employers seeking the profit motive above all else. He also provides a detailed look at the history of the professions in the United States and European countries. Although Canada has some important differences from the U.S., the U.S. experience Krause describes offers some important lessons.

For example, Krause writes that, in medicine, "by 1990, more than half of all U.S. physicians were practising in salaried positions.... Practically *all* current (1996) medical students can expect to start and remain on salary."¹

The Canadian engineering profession is also dominated by employees. What does this mean to the public and to the profession? What do we need to do about it?

Krause asks these important questions, which provide more food for thought: "Who controls the service critical to our lives in the modern period? If the doctors, the lawyers, the engineers and the professors lose their power over delivery of healthcare, legal services, applied science and knowledge itself, and they lose it to capitalism and the state, what will be the implications for all of us?"²

Clearly, the public interest is paramount in this view. It cannot be otherwise, for what would be the point of organized society if we did not consider the general welfare of all of those who belong to it? Indeed, even "capitalism" is a system of economic organization that society more or less accepts, based on the notion that it will organize economic

Advancing the public interest over profits

activity effectively and supposedly create wealth for the majority of citizens.

Points of view

Here is where I disagree with Krause: Capitalism is just an idea, and like any other philosophy, it can and has been used as a rationale for action. All political-economic systems must have human design, with more or less intelligence. Since we can choose the type of economic system we want for our society, capitalism is a choice, not an innate state of nature. Market forces are nothing more than the collective actions of individuals, motivated by a combination of desires spanning all of Maslov's triangle (which outlines the hierarchy of human needs).

Ultimately, economic activity is organized and controlled by people in private business and government. People's decisions determine the goodness of any action. We can either choose to be slaves to the profit motive, or decide that there is a greater public interest at stake. We can decide that the public's health and safety (and perhaps even our own) must always come before the immediate aggrandizement of profit.

So how does this relate to engineering? Krause wrote the following: "One thing that engineers almost never do, given their values, is to complain when they work on projects that maximize profits through cutting back on safety. The codes of ethics of engineering societies are mere pieces of paper, and the officers of the associations that have drafted the codes are practically all in corporate management."³

A "win-win" choice

Krause's words have an echo of truth for Canadian professional engineers as well. However, it is possible to choose safety over immediate profits, and in the process, create a win-win situation for professional engineers and their employers. In the long run, firms that become known for

safe products are more likely to survive. Seen in the correct light, a professional engineer's role in keeping the "public interest as paramount" is of critical importance to both companies and the state. The press abounds with examples of bad products, which were either boycotted or resulted in class action lawsuits for the firms that made them.

If a product or service causes sickness or even death, what will happen to the firm's profits or even survival in the face of a lawsuit? What happens to the publicly traded stock of such firms? What happens to their market share from the buying public?

Arriving at this state of awareness is, in my view, part of the role of a professional engineer. Many firms are good corporate citizens. They recognize the importance of creating safe products. Perhaps PEO needs to annually recognize some of these firms. They are generally the ones that also recognize the value and desirability of having professional engineers on staff.

Firms that can boast about the number of professional engineers they employ have demonstrated a clear commitment to serving the public interest through the works and services they provide to society. In a very real way, such firms show they care about the public they serve and to whom they owe their existence.

In the end, it comes down to the leadership that engineers and the profession are prepared to give. In my view, such leadership is needed and long overdue. ♦

References

1. Krause, Elliot A. *Death of the Guilds: Professions, States and the Advance of Capitalism, 1930 to the Present*, Yale University, 1996, p. 46.
2. Ibid, p. 2.
3. Ibid, p. 65.