

Missing the point

The July/August 2006 *Engineering Dimensions* article entitled “Improving a finely tuned complaints process” (p. 53) has finally caused me to write my first letter to the editor in my 32 years of membership. This self-congratulatory article misses the point entirely. The fact that there were 35 complaints in an organization comprising 67,000 members is not evidence that the process works, it is evidence that the process is completely incapable of handling real-world issues. It is a relic of the age of steam.

My father was also an engineer, so I have been reading *Engineering Dimensions* for most of my life and I can make the following observations:

1. With the exception of a few cases involving individuals calling themselves “sales engineers” when they were not members, almost all cases have been about civil/structural engineering.
2. No case has involved a large multinational corporation.
3. No case has been clouded by intellectual property issues.
4. No product from a production line has been declared unfit.
5. No case involved modern technology. In fact, although various codes have changed, no case involved technology invented in the 21st or even the 20th century.
6. No case has protected a whistleblower.
7. Large numbers of engineers graduate and work in engineering all their lives without ever joining PEO. For example, because of item 5, few software engineers regard PEO as being relevant to their area of expertise.

Let me tell you about a real situation that I know about. A contract engineer acting as a test supervisor in a sub-tier manufacturer in the aircraft industry tested a product, failed it and would not release it for shipment. Two people (not engineers) from American branches of the company grilled this person for an hour in an attempt to get it released, but the engineer refused.

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Ron Ruta, P.Eng., BASc

When the next shift reported for work (testing ran around the clock), the next test supervisor (another contractor who was not an engineer) released it immediately. When people were laid off nine months later, the contract engineer was the first to go.

The engineer did not file a complaint because:

1. He would have been terminated immediately.
2. Access to evidence would be lost. Evidence would be manufactured to state that repairs had been done.
3. The business would have gone to a plant in the US, so the product would still be built.
4. Evidence would be refused due to intellectual property issues, claiming the American branch of the company had proprietary technology rights that could not be disclosed to third-party investigators.
5. For reasons 1 to 6 listed above and the four other reasons listed, PEO would have been hopelessly outmaneuvered, out-

gunned and outmaneuvered and would not be able to change the outcome at all. Even if this were not the case, it is the perception among members.

The complaints process is central to our control of the practice of engineering, but every engineer in any manufacturing industry could regale you with similar horror stories. Saying the engineer should have filed anyway is pointless—we have lost control of engineering and the mere 35 complaints is iron-clad proof.

Ron Ruta, P.Eng., BASc, Mississauga, ON

Death by DDT

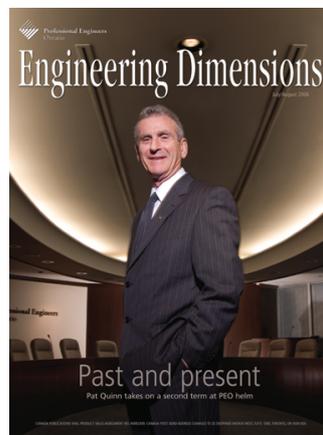
In his letter “Foundation of ethics” (*Engineering Dimensions*, September/October 2006, p. 11), M.B. Stephens dismisses Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* as having saved North American songbirds at the expense of Africans suffering from malaria.

Has Mr. Stephens never heard of the “canary in the mine?” Malaria has existed in Africa and elsewhere, including formerly in North America, for generations if not centuries. DDT, developed in the 1920s and ’30s, caused the deaths of many birds, and near extirpation of some. Sooner or later the element(s) of DDT responsible for those deaths would have affected humans in some way. We should be grateful DDT was banned before that happened.

H.M. (Mike) Street, P.Eng., Ancaster, ON

Driving the bus

I do not always read the complete President’s Message; however, the one that began the July/August 2006 issue (“A



future worth embracing,” p. 3) kept me interested. I agree that the C of A needs review, and that a Canada-wide registration designation is overdue. With their astounding contradiction, however, the last two sentences of the article prompted me to respond.

Although Mr. Quinn did not appear to be consciously referring to it, the penultimate sentence stated exactly what our attitude to the Kyoto Accord should be. Unfortunately, his closing remark is absolutely untrue of a lot of our profession and so many of our political leaders: turning opportunities into progress is *not* what we do. Rather than seize the chance to be world leaders, we will be dragged kicking and screaming into the future, as evidenced by the all-too-vocal skeptics who waste no opportunity to denigrate any opinion different than their own. There is and always has been more opportunity in the future than in the status quo. Even if one does not believe in global warming or the environmental degradation caused by the petrochemical industry and by burning fossil fuels, the fact that their feedstocks will one day run out is irrefutable. Why not be the leaders in conserving and replacing them? Why not drive the bus? It’s a lot better than being run over by it.

In a similar vein, now that we have been run over by the provincial government’s building code reform bus, isn’t it ironic that the minister, a lawyer, has as little understanding of his own profession as he does of ours? His comment that “there are some lawyers who haven’t been inside a courtroom in years” is true, thank goodness. There are plenty of lawyers who would end up in a courtroom only if they could not do their jobs properly.

In attempting to fix problems with the building regulation and permit process, the minister and his staff seem unable to grasp that a huge number of unqualified people dealing with building plans and permits is to be found in building department employ. Until Bill 124/02 was passed, there was no requirement for any education or qualification to be a building inspector or plans examiner. Presumably, a pulse was important, but it literally was stated in the building

code that there were no qualifications required for these people who have the authority to overrule professional training, judgment, and expertise.

The proposed reform was intended to remedy this, but, under the present minister, one of the most important parts of the bill was removed. When it became apparent that so many inspectors were going to be unable to qualify for their own jobs, the previous declarations that there would be no exemptions from the rules were adjusted to apply only to the private sec-

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tor. Inspectors can now be “interns” if they cannot pass their exams. Meanwhile, PEO waits for its day in court. Will the lawyer minister be inside that courtroom?

Mark Shoalts, P.Eng., Fenwick, ON

Accentuate the positive

As a newly licensed engineer I am quite proud to have obtained my stamp. Throughout my university days and work experience, my major goal was to become licensed, as a sign of my commitment to continual learning and professionalism. I also wanted to break down the walls some engineers seem to have built for themselves—to show others that engineers are approachable, easy to work with, and do respect non-engineers.

Since joining PEO I am appalled to read the articles in *Engineering Dimensions*, beginning with the Editor’s Note last issue. The editor said it would be easier to work for a fashion magazine,

covering the latest trends for fall than to speak about licensing. This is the very attitude I am trying to show people should not exist in any professional organization. We cannot all be engineers and, to fashion’s defence, colours actually do have an effect on mood and do play a part in lives. The Code of Ethics states that engineers should treat everyone with respect on a project, and yet it is acceptable to print an insulting statement about artistic people? What is more alarming is articles in *Engineering Dimensions* spend more time lamenting about the state of PEO than reaching out to the public, showing them we are not a group of elitist individuals, and are committed to their benefit and protection. In my brief experience, I have found that reaching out to others has garnered me much respect and trust.

I cannot begin to appreciate the effort involved in raising the status of engineers on a larger scale and I will not try here. I do know that PEO is facing critical precedents that could mean the end of regulated practice (or an eroded version at the very least). While much work needs to be done by all of us, in whatever capacity we can, I do think we should concentrate more on the positives that do exist and leverage that to keep pushing along. Engineers are very good at finding solutions and fixing problems. Surely we can focus on our abilities to overcome these challenges.

Marlene Wachko, P.Eng., Toronto, ON

A collective voice

I am compelled to respond to Ury Weiss’s letter to the editor, “Lack of cohesion” (*Engineering Dimensions*, September/October 2006, p. 10).

Weiss states that “We, as engineers, do not inspire respect among ourselves and do not project a cohesive professional organization to society at large.” His case in point refers to last year’s Hydro One issue, where, according to Weiss, “Tom Parkinson...committed a frontal assault on all engineers and scientists at Hydro One” and PEO and other engineers did not assist in any positive manner.

As the president and chair of the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers

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(OSPE), I would like to correct any confusion surrounding the issue at Hydro One or the idea that engineers lack a cohesive society.

First of all, as the voice of Ontario's professional engineers, OSPE was loud and clear in its role of standing up for Ontario's engineers at Hydro One. Past President and Chair of OSPE Annette Bergeron, P.Eng., wasted no time in sending a strong and proactive letter to The Honourable Christopher Bentley, then minister of labour, bestowing the virtues of Ontario's engineers and urging the government to step in and help resolve the issue.

In addition, Chris Cragg, P.Eng., then incoming president and chair of OSPE, spent his time on the issue, lobbying behind the scenes to move the entire issue to mediation. Ms. Bergeron also sent a compelling letter to Tom Parkinson, pres-

ident and CEO of Hydro One, urging him to reconsider his stance.

So, while Weiss is incorrect in his assumption that Hydro One engineers had no local support, he is partially correct when he believes that engineers lack solidarity. But that is where OSPE comes in.

As a separate and distinct organization from PEO (PEO regulates, OSPE advocates), OSPE dedicates itself to helping engineers and enhancing the engineering profession.

If you happened to listen to the 680 News radio station for six weeks during the earlier part of this year, you would have heard a pool of three 30-second radio commercials from OSPE. Each of these commercials invited listeners to "thank a professional engineer," because everything we see or use each day is a result of engineering ingenuity, creativity and innovation.

Of course, to do the work we do, we rely on revenue from membership dues. So, obviously, the more members we have, the louder our voice will become.

And since OSPE is the voice of Ontario's professional engineers, it's in all of our interests to join the society and add more voices to our common cause.

So, Mr. Weiss, I sincerely look forward to receiving your OSPE membership application, as well as applications from everyone else out there who believes that helping engineers and our profession is a good thing.
Daniel J. Young, P.Eng., MEng, Toronto, ON

White v. Company A

My sister had a summer job as a phone operator for Ontario Place, and when she encountered belligerents her tactic was to be increasingly formal and polite. From that unassailable position, she would watch her opponents predictably fall on their own swords of anger.

Mr. White, P.Eng., wrote an inflammatory letter to the mayor of a municipality, effectively accusing Company A of fraud in its dealings with the municipality (*Gazette, Engineering Dimensions*, September/October 2006, pp. 31-38). Due to his unprofessional approach, Company A used a gambit similar to my sister's to effortlessly dispatch Mr. White by calling him on the tone of his letter rather than the content of it. The difference here is that unlike a caller merely angry at the world, Mr. White's actions were aimed at protecting his fellow residents from inflated costs, and his claims were presumably based on his experience in practice. While I assume and hope Mr. White has learned from the PEO hearing's decision and penalties against him, may I also assume that his whistleblowing accusations were valid?

Andrew Fergusson, P.Eng., Waterloo, ON

Letters to the editor are welcomed, but should be kept brief and are subject to editing. Publication is at the editor's discretion; unsigned letters will not be published. The ideas expressed do not necessarily reflect the opinions and policies of the association, nor does the association assume responsibility for the opinions expressed. All letters pertaining to a current PEO issue are also forwarded to the appropriate committee for information. Address letters to jcoombes@peo.on.ca.