

BY MAXIMUS PERERA, P.ENG., MASC, MBA

I am inspired by the words of John F. Kennedy when he said, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” That is the kind of question to ask yourself if you want to become an engineer. Because, although the benefits for the individual are many, becoming a licensed P.Eng. has value to society far beyond what you may personally receive from joining the profession.

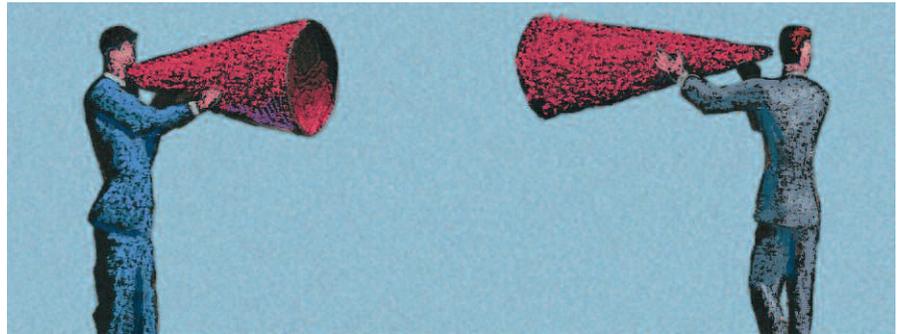
Taking responsibility

Why should you get licensed? Well, if you aspire to become a professional engineer (P.Eng.) and take responsibility for your work, a licence is required. Further, a Certificate of Authorization is required by individuals and business entities providing professional engineering services to the public. Without a licence, a person is prevented by law from earning a living as an individual professional engineer. And, without a licence, that person is reliant on a licensed supervisor who must be prepared to assume the corresponding responsibility. Professional self-respect may therefore be, in itself, sufficient motivation for many to seek licensure.

However, and probably more important, the real motivation for licensure is to be found in the aims and objectives of the engineering profession and government legislation. The profession may be thought of as a tripod, where Professional Engineers Ontario (PEO) is the regulatory leg, and the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers (OSPE) and the learned societies are the other two voluntary legs. All aim to improve professionalism among engineering practitioners, but from different perspectives. For example, PEO focuses on safeguarding life, health, property and public welfare, while the societies focus on the self-interests of their members.

Looking only at PEO’s perspective for the moment, promotion of professionalism is achieved by setting and maintaining standards relating to edu-

Licensure: What’s in it for me?



You don’t need to be licensed in Ontario to do engineering if a licensed supervisor takes responsibility for your work. Consequently, university students often ask of licensure: “What’s in it for me?”

cation (accreditation) and practical training (experience). Every licensed person is expected to maintain standards of knowledge, skill, qualifications, and standards to practise professional engineering in an ethical manner, and to engage voluntarily in continuing professional development to maintain currency of knowledge and skills. This raises the profile of licensed engineers, because it is a public statement that they are prepared to subject themselves to the scrutiny of their peers should they conduct themselves improperly.

Regardless of the motive behind seeking licensure, there are many identifiable benefits to obtaining a licence.

Benefits to the individual

Professional confidence—Professional recognition instills a sense of confidence in the minds of the public that a person meets minimum levels of competence and is accountable to a regulatory body of peers whose principal objective is public protection. Furthermore, the public feels assured that a person’s competence has been assessed by other

professionals knowledgeable in a particular field of expertise.

Peer recognition—A P.Eng. licence signifies recognition by PEO’s committees that you meet the minimum qualification and experience requirements expected of a professional person and hence you become eligible to serve as a peer. This recognition extends to one’s colleagues and other practitioners in the profession.

Marketability—More and more employers are requiring a licence as a prerequisite for appointment to certain engineering positions. Unlicensed people find it increasingly difficult to secure employment in engineering positions with certain higher levels of responsibility.

Public service—Licensure for engineers working in government has become increasingly important. Many municipal, provincial and federal agencies require that certain engineering positions, particularly those with higher levels of responsibility, be filled only by licensed professional engineers.

Professional societies—Organizations such as OSPE and some of the learned societies

require that a person be registered as a professional engineer or a student member before membership is granted.

Lifestyle benefits—Members of OSPE receive a benefits package that is available for the exclusive use of licensed people. P.Engs enjoy special financial benefits, such as reduced insurance premiums, etc.

Use of reserved titles—Every licensed person is entitled under the *Professional Engineers Act* to use the title (and abbreviation) that describes one as a professional engineer (P.Eng.) Unlicensed people who use the reserved title or abbreviation are in violation of the Act.

Statutory empowerment—A number of provincial acts and regulations require work of an engineering nature be performed exclusively by professional engineers. Examples of such legislation include:

- *Ontario Health and Safety Act RSO 1990* and regulations made therein;
- *Ontario Water Resources Act*; and
- *Safe Drinking Water Act 2002*.

There are approximately 77 pieces of legislation referring to engineers and professional engineers in the acts and regulations.

Safety net—Licensed engineers can easily adapt to changes in the workplace, such as downsizing, outsourcing of research and development services, etc. P.Engs have flexibility to move on as a consultant engineer once they have more than five years of engineering experience.

Benefits to the employer

Confidence in professionalism of staff—Companies prefer to hire professional engineers to fill positions of responsibility. Licensing is widely regarded as an additional, and objective, indication of competence.

Recourse for improper conduct—Employers may lodge a complaint of improper conduct if a licensed employee conducts himself or herself unprofessionally. Conduct may range from gross negligence to incompetence. PEO investigates complaints, conducts hearings, and takes disciplinary action, if necessary. The benefit to an employer lies in the fact a finding of guilt by PEO may provide grounds for dismissal.

Marketability of organization—The public and clients respond well if an organization employs professional people as a matter of principle.

Compliance with statutory requirements—Legislation, such as the *Occupational Health and Safety Act, 1993* and regulations, holds employers responsible for the safety of their employees. By appointing an appropriately licensed person, an employer not only takes appropriate action aimed at safeguarding the public, but also complies with statutory requirements.

Academic opportunities—Canadian Engineering Accreditation Board policy stipulates that deans of engineering and the chairs of engineering departments be professional engineers. In addition, faculty teaching courses in engineering science and engineering design, and the majority of those initiating changes in the curriculum committees of engineering programs, are expected to be professional engineers. Certainly, for those aspiring to secure teaching positions in academe, a licence is necessary.

Benefits to the profession

Recognition amongst other professions—Systems of professional licensing are common in Canada and around the world, and are generally recognized as conferring professional status on those licensed. PEO provides the only recognized licensing system for engineers in Ontario, which is recognized by sister associations/ordre, and other professional organizations.

Public recognition of competence—The informed public recognizes the value of professional licensing, mainly because it affords them an additional measure of protection and peace of mind.

Benefits to Canada

Safety, health and interests of society protected—Apart from precautionary measures taken by the province in its own right, licensing serves as an additional safeguard against unsafe practices. This is the engineering profession's contribution to serving and protecting public safety, health and welfare. In this context, PEO is a partner with the province and the federal government.

Preservation of professional standards—With Canada's increasing involvement in glob-

alization, it has become critical for this country to become competitive at the international level. Licensing contributes substantially to competitiveness. Canada is recognized by many other countries as a dominant player in the engineering sector, which has distinct political and socioeconomic advantages for the country. I would encourage readers to read "Pride and Professionalism," *Engineering Dimensions*, September/October 2004, pp. 46-53), for further inspiration.

Fostering public trust

I'll finish by providing a slightly indirect answer to the question asked in the title, i.e. Licensure? What's in it for me? In my opening, I quoted John F. Kennedy. What I wanted to say in so doing was that a true professional contributes to the prestige of his or her profession and enhances the public trust. It is important to convey to the public the message that individuals who have been duly licensed via a proper peer review practise their profession under a solemn vow to put the public's safety and welfare first. This enhances the public's trust and respect for the importance of such a noble profession. The licence ultimately helps to foster a high level of appreciation and, consequently, remuneration for those who achieve licensure. ✎

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