



A CHANGING LANDSCAPE FOR ONTARIO AND CANADIAN P.ENGs

An international pool of applicants for the Ontario P.Eng. licence has brought significant changes to PEO's registration practices. As the regulator marks its 90th anniversary, it's important to reflect on PEO's efforts to embrace the diversity of its membership.

By Gary Thompson, P.Eng.

IN 1922, THE ONTARIO GOVERNMENT created the first legislation that began the journey toward regulating professional engineering in Ontario. At that time, the population of Canada was approximately 9 million people, mostly comprising individuals of European descent. Of that number, 1.2 million were immigrants, mostly from Europe.

In 1937, the *Professional Engineers Act* (PEA) was amended to ensure that only qualified individuals could be registered as professional engineers and practise professional engineering. At that time, the Canadian population had grown to approximately 11 million, with immigrants arriving at a rate of about 500,000 a year.

By 2006, the population of Ontario, alone, was 12 million, almost the same as that of the entire country in 1937. But by this time, 27.2 per cent had a mother tongue that was not one of the two official languages (English or French), 28.3 per cent were listed as immigrants, and more than one-fifth were visible minorities.

Today, close to one-third of PEO's membership comprises individuals who are internationally trained engineers. These statistics confirm what we already know: that Canada today is a mosaic of individuals from all around the world. It would not be a far stretch to say that PEO's membership reflects the cornucopia of cultures that comprise our Canadian population.

WHAT DOES THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE MEAN TO PEO?

The current PEO council comprises 29 members. Twelve of them are appointed by the lieutenant governor, of whom five are not professional engineers. It has over 30 committees, as well as task forces and subcommittees, made up primarily of its members. Council includes six women (one of whom is a member of a visible minority), and eight men who are members of visible minorities—this represents just under one-third of the council comprising visible minorities.

One of the challenges of any professional organization is that it must look outward in recognizing relevant change, and look inward to preserve the essence of why it was created. What is important is that those inside the organization do not simply look through the windows at the outside, but also open the windows to allow the winds of

change to blow in and that they embrace the wind. We can appreciate that by allowing the wind to blow inward, some amount of turbulence might be experienced. But the quality and integrity of an organization should not be judged by the amount of turbulence present, but rather how that force and energy is harnessed and directed toward making the organization relevant, viable and sustainable.

We only have to look to the actions and corresponding results of PEO over the last 10 years to appreciate how it has managed the turbulence resulting from the winds of change. Over PEO's 90-year history, the last 10 years might be the most dynamic.

RESPONDING TO CHANGE

At least since 2001, PEO has worked assiduously to make access to the engineering profession equitable and fair. This can be due to the direct influence of its growing membership and, more specifically, the one-third of it who can be categorized as having been educated outside of Canada.

Roughly speaking, over the last 10 years an average 47 per cent of all new PEO licences have been issued to internationally trained engineers. This ranged from about 20 per cent in 2002, peaking in 2007 with 56 per cent and falling to 36 per cent in 2011. In 2002, 20 per cent of all internationally trained applicants had all their technical examinations waived based on the quality of their engineering education.

The Canadian Council of Professional Engineers (now known as Engineers Canada) and its members agreed in its 2002 *From Consideration to Integration* (FC2I) report that "...the profession should work together to facilitate the integration of foreign

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trained engineers into the profession, ensuring that they can obtain their P.Eng. more quickly and efficiently, without lowering admission standards or compromising public safety.”

The ambitious FC2I project ran from 2004 to 2010 and looked to identify barriers to registration and licensing for internationally educated engineering graduates. From the outset, PEO signalled its intention to be not just a participant in this project, but also to see more than just a study done. PEO was supportive of a clear road map for implementation of the final recommendations.

It was noted in the project report that at the various stages of engagement with stakeholders, many of the participants indicated a strong desire to help implement the recommendations. Few, however, showed much willingness to step up and lead. In many ways, this epitomizes the approach of the larger community to the integration of internationally trained professionals in our society.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

As a person with engineering training from another country, it became quite clear to me shortly after my arrival in Canada that if I wanted to obtain a licence and practise engineering, I would have to supplement my previous training with local Canadian academic credentials. No fast track was offered; no special process was in place. I applied via the same process that everyone else did.

Since then, PEO, as part of its active participation in the Engineers Canada study, has shown a willingness not just to recognize the existence of others who share

a background similar to mine, but also to create and implement processes that offer the internationally trained professional a meaningful opportunity to have his or her credentials reviewed against local criteria. It should be noted that, from the beginning, PEO has stated that no actions it would take in this area would in any way lower admission standards or compromise public safety.

In 2002, PEO saw 3025 applications for licensure; 2007 of these applicants were trained outside Canada. These numbers peaked in 2008, with 4449 applicants, 2211 of whom were trained outside Canada. In 2011, there were 4328 total applicants with 1734 trained elsewhere than Canada.

One of the early initiatives that shows PEO walking the walk, was the involvement of then Registrar and CEO Kim Allen, P.Eng., FEC, as a member of the Toronto Region Immigration Employment Council (TRIEC), a group organized to study barriers to licensing and registration for internationally educated professionals in the Toronto area.

Since January 2002, applicants to PEO have been able to apply prior to arriving in Canada. Changes to the PEA in 2001 made provision for applicants with accredited academic and work experience to receive provisional licences while they worked under the supervision of a resident professional engineer.

In January 2005, the Ontario government published a progress report, *Opening Doors: An Investment in Prosperity*. In the report, the government made it clear the integration of internationally trained professionals is not the responsibility of any single organization or individual, but rather requires a collaborative effort on the part of all the various certifying bodies. The report goes on to outline clearly how PEO has been intimately involved in all the stages of the work plan. Of the 38 regulatory organizations in Ontario, PEO, along with the colleges of nurses and teachers, is doing the most in terms of engaging internationally trained professionals.

Further, in 2006, the Ontario government tabled the *Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act* (FARPA). In 2009, PEO was audited with respect to compliance to this act, and according to FARPA officials: “overall, the registration policies and procedures of PEO appear to be fair, transparent, objective and impartial.”

So it would appear that PEO has been successful in responding to the changes in its application demographics. It has processes in place today that are accessible and fair to all applicants, particularly those with foreign credentials. It is clear that by its involvement in the Engineers Canada study and other initiatives, PEO is motivated to be fair and equitable, while not putting at risk the interests and safety of the public. Compared to when I applied for licensure two decades ago, PEO today is a far more accessible and equitable organization.

WHAT CONSTITUTES SUCCESS?

Trying to grasp success has been described as something akin to trying to hold on to a slippery eel. Just when you think you have it, it eludes you. Definitions of success need to be practical and achievable. Has PEO been successful in its attempt to be inclusive and develop and manage a fair and equitable admission process?

In the article “No Room for Talent?” in *Corporate Knights* magazine, PEO is cited as “...a good example of a licensing body who is addressing the needs of IEGs (internationally educated graduates).” It also states that “...immigrants face a ‘sticky floor’ rather than a glass ceiling, but change is fast approaching.” The sticky floor relates to an immigrant being hired based on his or her qualifications, but not able to progress because those credentials are not recognized by regulatory organizations.

A serious misconception exists that could serve as a source of confusion when assessing the success of organizations like PEO. Many believe that because of the role PEO plays, it indirectly guarantees jobs to successful applicants. It is made even more confusing by an

Engineers Canada document stating “...it is part of our social responsibility to ensure that people that the government is bringing in have the opportunity to work in the profession for which they are educated.”

It would be useful here to highlight the principal focus of PEO as stated in the PEA:

Principal object

(3) *The principal object of the Association is to regulate the practice of professional engineering and to govern its members, holders of certificates of authorization, holders of temporary licences, holders of provisional licences and holders of limited licences in accordance with this Act, the regulations and the by-laws in order that the public interest may be served and protected. R.S.O. 1990, c. P.28, s. 2(3); 2001, c. 9, Sched. B, s. 11(2).*

In other words, while PEO has been successful in streamlining its registration for internationally educated applicants, it is not in the business of finding employment for newly licensed members.

Central to all of this work is the application process. It has seen significant change over the last five years. Change brings challenges. To PEO, these challenges would encompass constant scrutiny of its application processes and assessments of its effectiveness. Interestingly, as diverse as are the backgrounds of the applicants, similarly diverse are the standards of what a successful process should be.

So what of success? Success could be based on three pillars. The first would be efficiency KPIs (key performance indicators) related to how the application process is run. These could be reported quarterly and would provide a high level of transparency to the current process. Another pillar would be applicant satisfaction surveys. It may prove a challenge to get unbiased information from applicants who were not successful, but it

offers them a chance to provide feedback that could prove useful in identifying opportunities for improvement in the process. A third pillar could be random anonymous surveys of staff and volunteers involved in the application process. The interesting thing about three pillars is that the success of the process must be based on all three. Like a three-legged stool, if one leg is missing, it cannot be stable. Σ

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