

[LETTERS]



Y2K HOAX MYTH

I write with an emphatic hope to help stamp out the perniciously cynical and completely false myth that the expenses and efforts invested to identify and repair Y2K-related software faults were some kind of gigantic hoax, perpetrated by greedy, thieving computer programmers.

And here is the myth again, repeated by engineer Ken Dias in his letter (“In need of study,” p. 54) in the January/February 2014 issue of *Engineering Dimensions*: “Remember Y2K and the scare tactics used then? My company, as did many others, spent millions on this, and we all knew what a hoax it was!”

Would Mr. Dias also complain that his 2013 fire insurance policy was a hoax because his house didn’t burn down?

As a “retired” software engineer with 30 years of independent, self-employed contract

experience working for a variety of clients in a range of economic sectors, I can assure engineer Dias that the managers of the very large financial corporation I worked for around the time of the Y2K race were not stupid enough to spend millions of dollars to fix a non-existent problem.

And I can assure engineer Dias that there was real fear and real stress for all those working on Y2K, and real career damage was suffered by some due to their Y2K work.

The irony of the Y2K software experience is that programmers did such a good job of finding and fixing the Y2K bugs that on Y2K day, the world kept functioning with almost no (only a few) glitches, and instantly adopted the Y2K hoax myth.

Steve Petrie, P.Eng., Oakville, ON

BRIDGING THE GAP TO GOVERNMENT

I was intrigued by your recent Government Liaison Program (GLP) journal articles related to engineers being involved in politics (“Engineers as politicians: It’s in the public interest,” January/February 2014, p. 38, and “Calling all candidates! How engineers can play a role in Ontario’s upcoming elections,” March/April 2014, p. 23). Although I have never been involved in the program, I applaud PEO’s focus on bridging the gap for engineers between our current mandate to serve the public through applied science to the broader mandate to serve the public through expertise and professionalism.

As a P.Eng. who is currently running for Toronto city council for Toronto-Danforth, I have found this understanding critical to my own decision to enter public life. Many of my engineering peers share my passion and social conscience to help build better communities and places to live. Yet we run up against many obstacles, such as a lack of support from workplaces, broad networks in local public engagement and financial resources.

I have been fortunate to have a workplace that shares my values of civic engagement.

At Morrison Hershfield, I have found a culture of integrity, accountability and mutual respect that extends beyond our office and our projects to the community at large. Through this organization’s support, including mentorship and skills training, I have been able to pursue excellence not only in my field of expertise but also beyond. Now I have the opportunity to enter public life with the support of my colleagues at Morrison Hershfield, in addition to my wife and children and local community.

If more engineers are to be active politically and seek public office, then in addition to PEO’s focus on this important issue, we need to engage forward-thinking engineering firms. We need to invest in collective and individual capabilities as they bring benefits not only to the bottom line, but also to our society through better governance. We are training and growing not only the future leaders of our organizations, but also governments.

It is a breath of fresh air for PEO to bring attention to this most important topic. I look forward to meeting engineering peers and colleagues in the lead up to the October 27, 2014 municipal election. I encourage other engineers to bring their perspectives to their local communities as I hope to in Toronto city council.

Dave Andre, P.Eng., Scarborough, ON

[LETTERS]

WE'RE NOT AT FAULT

Jatin Nathwani's article, "Poisoned politics of power plants" (*Engineering Dimensions*, March/April 2014, p. 37), was out of place in our publication. Nathwani not only scolds all voting citizens but suggests that by "pointing fingers" we are really the ones at fault.

The gas plants were not cancelled as he repeatedly points out; they were relocated at the point of substantial completion. The pressure on politicians came from the NIMBY (not in my back yard) self-interest groups. Power is in greatest need in the GTA and generating it hundreds of kilometres away, overburdening power lines and incurring transmission losses, does not help the environment.

I trust most Ontarians believe in democratic processes. Those who vote are guided by promises, programs and the integrity of the candidates and the government they form. At least Nathwani could have confirmed what most of us think—that politicians have largely abandoned their democratic mandate across Canada and at all levels of government. We are well aware of the many examples of entrenched entitlement and party politics of many elected politicians. Partisan politics trumped democratic principles, value for the greater good, and good judgment in the power plant fiasco.

I would submit that it is not rage and protest that undermines; it is party politics, weak government and self-serving politicians who make decisions they are not competent to make and who do not seek out competent advice or listen to it. Sole source crony consultants are part of the scam. In the power plant scandal, facts were hidden, documents destroyed and the criminal acts that may have been committed are being investigated.

Protests are a democratic right and, yes, they may undermine and harm our infrastructure or society. However, these protests can only bear fruit if the government permits this result, without competently weighing the consequences. In the Ontario case, the government listens to protests selectively: witness the industrial wind turbines of the *Green Energy Act*—it removed democratic powers of municipalities and no end in protests and lawsuits have had any effect. Perhaps Nathwani could have suggested a way to fix our democratic system rather than scolding us for pointing fingers and protesting too much.
Elio Comello, P.Eng., Camlachie, ON

COMPETENCE OVER FAIRNESS

With reference to "Is it time to do away with engineering's Canadian experience requirement?" (*Engineering Dimensions*, March/April 2014, page 17:

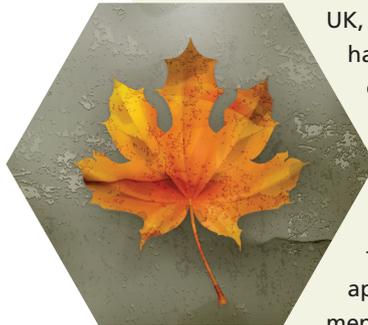
I was troubled by the article, an apologetic for dispensing with a 12-month, in-country experience requirement. The argument seems short on supporting data and relies partly on an appeal to emotion. The heartbreaking nature of stories of exclusion is sad but irrelevant when it comes to an assessment of competence to practise. It is fine to point out that there is no "clear, measurable outcome of what communications skills candidates are supposed to obtain" during the 12-month period. Surely that fact supports the development of a Canadian communication experience standard, and not doing away with the requirement altogether?

My primary role as an engineer involves failure investigation and the role of code or standard compliance in that failure. I sometimes need to refer to UK, US or even Australian standards, and have conducted investigations with US engineers. My experience with foreign standards (and even some from our southern neighbour) is that there are a multitude of different approaches involved, along with unstated assumptions that one only learns about through application of the standard under the mentorship of an engineer experienced in the entire framework that surrounds the standard. It has taught me that I could never step into another country and expect them to license me to practise without first going through that mentorship process. That includes the US, the nation that we are closest to in terms of harmony of standardization.

Perhaps the solution is for the regulator to create a Canadian experience practice exam that tests exactly those sorts of Canadian competencies. That would require the development of a standard that quantified what skills the profession feels are needed prior to licensure. A newcomer who believes they are competent to practise without that period of mentorship could then demonstrate that competence through meeting an objective standard. An ability to communicate in English or French at a satisfactory level could be a part of that.

I get uneasy whenever I hear fairness being placed to trump competence. The Canadian public's primary concern, in light of things such as the Elliot Lake mall collapse, is certainly first and foremost on competence.

M.B. Oliver, CD, P.Eng., Edmonton, AB



SOLUTION IN SEARCH OF A PROBLEM

Engineering Dimensions' recent coverage on professional development treks through a well-ploughed field ("Continuing professional development on PEO horizon," May/June 2014, p. 24). No evidence is offered that the government or the public is demanding continuing professional development, nor is there a single example of a government imposing a mandatory continuing competency program on a profession.

Professional development and quality assurance are window dressing brought in by regulators who cannot take the liability for continuing competence but wish to give the public the impression they are doing their jobs. Until proof is offered that compulsory professional development or quality control has any impact on continuing competency, the CPDCQATF's tasks are a solution in search of a problem.

Competency can be defined as learning a task and doing it often enough that a reasonable assessment would conclude you knew what you were doing. When someone interviews either a contractor, employee or an engineer for a major contract, the first question asked is about experience, the second is about references that vouch for competency and character. I have never been asked, nor have I ever asked, in countless interviews, which books have been read, which conferences have been attended, or for an account of 240 hours of extra curricular activities over the last three years.

Incompetency is a much more complex determination. Mistakes, misjudgments and lapses of character are not, as of themselves, proof of incompetency. No one is infallible, and "measure twice and cut once," or "the person who never made a mistake never made anything," are truisms reflecting reality.

PEO has more urgent priorities, i.e.:

1. Establish the disciplines of engineering it regulates and provide standards of practice for each of these disciplines. Had adequate standards for the review of an existing building, or for the demolition of a structure, been in place in time, it is arguable that the fatalities at the Algo Centre Mall and the Uptown cinema could have been avoided.
2. Issue all member licences showing designated disciplines.
3. Provide Certificates of Authorization (Cs of A) at reasonable cost to permit actual practise only by those who take direct responsibility for their engineering work by professional seals on their work, or who qualify as consulting engineers, and only them to practise in their stipulated disciplines.
4. Require C of A holders to requalify every five years by providing evidence of up-to-date activity in their fields, and references from clients, employers or colleagues in their fields of practice, testifying to their competency and character.
5. Provide a distinct discipline process for C of A holders for allegations of incompetency and have judgment by peers.

There are factual precedents for governments abolishing self regulation of professions. The actions suggested above, implemented expeditiously, may preclude government action if the Algo Mall commission report deservedly criticizes PEO for its inaction in a critical area of a regulator's responsibilities. PEO cannot claim to regulate a profession like engineering without standards of practice for all disciplines.

Patrick Quinn, P.Eng., Toronto, ON

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