

## [ GOVERNANCE ]

### REGULATION, ADVOCACY AND MORE: UNDERSTANDING PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

By Sharon Aschaiek

**PUBLIC INTEREST** and **personal interest**: they are the two overarching principles that affect the way engineers operate. Committing to the first is a requirement of practice essential to ensuring public safety; focusing on the second is important for individual advancement in the profession. In Ontario, these two principles are supported by a variety of organizations, and understanding their objective and functions, and their involvement with the engineering profession, is important for knowing your rights, responsibilities and opportunities as an engineer.

#### TYPES OF ORGANIZATIONS

##### Regulator

Engineering is a self-regulated profession in Ontario governed by Professional Engineers Ontario (PEO) under the authority of the *Professional Engineers Act* (PEA), a provincial statute. As the regulatory body for the province's 80,000 engineers, PEO has a mandate to protect and serve the public, and to ensure individuals and companies providing engineering services uphold a strict code of professional ethics and conduct. PEO's primary functions are providing licences to qualified engineers, and disciplining those who are found guilty of professional misconduct. PEO's role also involves developing competent and ethical professional engineers by establishing standards of practice that must be followed by all members of the profession. As a comparison, PEO fulfills the same role for engineering as the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario for medicine, the Law Society of Upper Canada for law, and Chartered Professional Accountants of Ontario for accounting.

"PEO, in legal terms, is an authority that the government has delegated to oversee the profession," says George Comrie, P.Eng., FEC, president-elect of PEO and principal of George Comrie Consulting Services. "Our acid test is not how well we conduct chapter events for members. Our priority has to be on our core regulatory functions. Our deal is that we have to put the public first."

##### Advocacy

Professional associations and advocacy groups respond to the concerns, and advance the professional and economic prospects, of their members. Such organizations serve engineers in a variety of ways, including advocacy, professional development and member events. In this way, they are similar to advocacy groups in other professions, such as the Ontario Medical Association,

the Human Resources Professionals Association of Ontario and the International Association of Business Communicators.

Key among these types of groups in the province that serve engineers is the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers (OSPE), a member-interest advocacy organization created in 2000 by PEO and the Canadian Society of Professional Engineers to separate regulatory and non-regulatory affairs for the engineering profession.

"We look after the economic interests of engineers, and ensure that when the government is establishing public policy, either at the federal or provincial level, they take the engineering perspective into consideration," says Sandro Perruzza, CEO of OSPE.

Other organizations in Ontario that focus on serving the best interests of engineers include Consulting Engineers of Ontario—which is a member of the national advocacy group Association of Consulting Engineering Companies—the Ontario Network of Women in Engineering in Ontario, and the Ontario Municipal Engineers Association.

##### Learned societies

Also known as learned academies, scholarly societies or academic associations, learned societies are organizations that further the body of knowledge relating to a profession, an academic discipline or an area of study. Usually non-profits, and usually country- or internationally based, these groups are like clubs where membership may be open to all, or to those with certain qualifications. In engineering, such groups include the Canadian Society for Chemical Engineering and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. In other professional milieus, such groups include the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada and the National Geographic Society.

##### Hybrids

Hybrid organizations perform a mix of functions that may include regulation, advocacy and/or advancing the knowledge of a field. Within Canada's engineering profession, most other provincial regulators fall into this category in that they serve to protect both the interest of the public and the professional interests of engineers. Another example is the Ontario Association of Architects, a self-regulating organization overseen by the provincial government's *Architects Act* that also engages in government advocacy and provides professional resources for its members.

##### REGULATION VERSUS ADVOCACY

While a wide range of organizations can be associated with a profession, most fall into one of two broad categories: serving the public, or serving the profession. The first category has only one organization, the regulator, while the second can have multiple groups. As the regulator of engineering in Ontario, PEO stands out from all other groups in that its primary purpose is licensing and discipline, and its advocacy function extends to promoting what is good for the public by ensuring its practitioners meet rigorous practice standards.

By contrast, the second category can have an unlimited number of representative bodies. The main objective of groups such as OSPE and others like it is to serve the professional and economic interests of their members. The value of having separate groups for conducting regulation and advocacy within any profession and, in this case, engineering, is that it makes it possible to avoid a conflict of interest between protecting the public and protecting members of a profession, which can arise when one organization performs both functions.

“PEO is the self-regulating body that enables professional engineers to carry on their practice according to their oath or according to best practices to serve society...If engineers want to get involved in shaping public policy in the public domain, how governments are regulating this particular activity, whether there’s an engineering solution to a societal problem, they can join OSPE in those pursuits,” says Gail Krantzberg, director of the engineering and public policy program at McMaster University. “It puts too much tension within PEO for it to have both functions...because it becomes a bit blurry as to how the institution is going to balance its regulatory requirement versus other member activities.”

Here’s a further breakdown of how PEO as Ontario’s engineering regulator differs from the dominant advocacy group for the profession in Ontario, OSPE.

### **Mandate, authority and accountability**

PEO’s mandate is to regulate the practice of engineering in Ontario in the public interest. The organization has been delegated this authority from the provincial government to self-regulate the profession, which includes governing licence holders, as well as holders of Certificates of Authorization, temporary licences, provisional licences and limited licences. The organization is accountable to the government through the PEA, and to the public, as it is governed by laws requiring it to serve and protect the public interest.

OSPE is the only association in Ontario with a mandate to represent the province’s entire engineering community. Its mission is to support, represent and advance the interests of engineers, as well as to promote engineering excellence for the benefit of the public. OSPE derives its authority from, and is accountable, only to its members.

### **Membership—admittance and benefits**

Membership within PEO is mandatory for all engineers who require and successfully obtain a

licence to practise in the province. The organization does not recruit members, but promotes licensure for all engineering graduates who want to practise engineering, and provides information on how to obtain a licence. Membership in OSPE, on the other hand, is optional, and the organization recruits to attract new members. OSPE has approximately 14,000 members consisting of professional engineers, engineering graduates and students.

As a regulator, PEO does not provide its members with benefits in addition to a licence to practise engineering. OSPE provides its members with a wide range of benefits that include advocating to the government for their best professional interests, professional development training, career services, mentoring, networking events and savings on relevant products and services.

“We don’t just comment on an issue, we provide solutions to government,” says Perruzza about the society’s advocacy work. “That’s where governments are starting to see the value that engineers are providing. We’re forecasting issues before they become issues and try to put solutions in place.”

### **Governance and influence**

PEO is governed by a council, the composition and operation of which are dictated by the PEA. Most councillors are elected by PEO’s licensed membership, and some are appointed by the lieutenant governor of Ontario; appointed councillors may or may not be professional engineers. PEO Registrar Gerard McDonald, P.Eng., is responsible for staff implementation of PEO council decisions and policies. Members can have influence on the operation and governance of PEO by participating in committees, task forces, chapters and other groups and initiatives, and by voting in PEO council elections.

“The organization depends on the members of the profession to do a lot of the work...and members have a huge say in how PEO runs. There is a significant number of volunteers involved in our operation,” Comrie says.

OSPE, meanwhile, is governed by a board of directors with nine members, each of whom is elected to a three-year term by OSPE members. All board members are professional members of OSPE and, as such, are professional engineers licensed by PEO. As with PEO, members of the society can play an active role in shaping its policies by volunteering on committees and voting in elections.

“They’ve [OSPE] got subcommittees dealing with whatever topical issues the membership wants to tackle,” Krantzberg says. “It’s an opportunity for an engineer who’s interested in a particular field, or a new development, or a new technology that’s either being misused or could be used better, to get that message out to government.”

### **Co-operation**

While PEO and OSPE each have distinct purposes and activities, the groups do work together in a few areas of common interest. Some of the joint projects and initiatives the organizations collaborate on include jointly hosting the annual Ontario Professional Engineers Awards, supporting National Engineering Month, and partnering on policy advocacy work and on events relevant to both groups’ members. As well, both groups participate in a joint relations committee to discuss mutually relevant issues.

“We have to have a common understanding of who is supposed to do what, and who should be involved in what,” Comrie says. “If we could broaden the consensus on what everybody’s role is, it would allow us to... maximize the extent to which we work together, in areas where we can, and we would all get more done and do a better job.” Σ