

VOLUNTEERS needed

Optimizing work of volunteers seen as path to regulatory enhancement

Volunteers have always been a key part of PEO operations, but the regulator is now offering leadership development as an additional reward for getting more involved in administrative and governance work.

By Michael Mastromatteo

PEO President George Comrie, P.Eng., FEC, was characteristically forthright with some of his comments at the association's 2016 annual general meeting.

While discussing his priorities as president for the coming year, Comrie offered a few thoughts on the importance of volunteer input in the governance and administration of the engineering regulator.

"I don't believe it is reasonable for an organization like PEO to just assume that everyone who volunteers comes with the background and skills necessary to make an effective contribution," Comrie said. "I have long felt that we could do a better job of ensuring that candidates for volunteer leadership in PEO have a solid common understanding of the mandate, roles and responsibilities, authorities and procedures of the organization."

Rather than dissuading potential volunteers, however, Comrie's remarks actually highlight the

challenge PEO faces in better utilizing the talent, dedication and commitment of member volunteers.

It's an issue that has long concerned PEO as it seeks to preserve the privileges and responsibilities of self-regulation in the public interest. In the last few years, for example, the regulator has stepped up its efforts to attract the right candidates for volunteer positions on task forces and committees, while at the same time enhancing its volunteer recognition and appreciation programs. PEO also holds its 36 chapters as a point of first contact for would-be volunteers, which often serve to attract members and acclimatize them for long-term volunteer service with the regulator and the engineering profession (see page 32).

In 2009, PEO created its *Committees and Task Forces Policy-Reference Guide*, which calls for broadened volunteer engagement and for efforts to ensure

committees facilitate ongoing volunteer learning and leadership development.

Although volunteer appointments have always been an avenue for members to support PEO's work, it has only been recently that they have been touted as a form of leadership succession. In other words, encouraging volunteerism, either at the committee or chapter level, is emphasized as a path to develop future leaders.

PEO has certainly enhanced its services to volunteers in the years since. As PEO Registrar Gerard McDonald, P.Eng., notes in PEO's *Volunteer Manual* (www.peo.on.ca/index.php/ci_id/29876/la_id/1.htm): "My goal is to create an environment where our volunteers can be very productive. This will help to attract more volunteers and enable us to plan for leadership succession—and help our future leaders prepare."

PEO also has leadership succession in mind with some recent council initiatives intended to bring more diversity to its volunteer talent pool. In addition to looking for ways to engage new and younger volunteers, PEO council is also studying the concept of term limits for council members and volunteers as another way to create more opportunities for those interested in serving PEO and the profession. There is no doubt volunteers are the *sine qua non* of PEO operations. As stated in the *Volunteer Manual*, volunteers play a significant role at PEO by contributing their time, energy and exceptional talents to its operations.

VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT

At present, about 1000 engineers, engineering interns and non-engineers volunteer their time each year to work on behalf of the regulator, either by serving on committees and subcommittees, task forces or through the chapter system.

PEO volunteers may become involved at the chapter level, proceed to a committee or task force, and eventually seek a seat on council—with the possibility of becoming one of PEO's future leaders.

But that isn't always the case. Not all PEO volunteers get their start at the chapter level. Occasionally, PEO's people development department has a need for volunteers with special expertise to fill positions on different committees and task forces. In these instances, volunteer recruiting becomes more active. PEO looks to match the right experience and skill set with certain roles when selecting volunteer talent for service on committees and task forces. It is also keen on recruiting younger and more diverse volunteers.

PEO members looking to volunteer on a committee or task force go through a selection process developed by the people development department that begins with a review and assessment of applications and resumes. A shortlist of the



At the recent annual general meeting, President George Comrie, P.Eng., FEC, cited the importance of PEO providing the right training and leadership development opportunities for members looking to take a more active role in the regulator's operations.

Long-time PEO volunteer and former president Peter DeVita, P.Eng., FEC, requires volunteers with special expertise in his role as chair of PEO's Emerging Disciplines Task Force.



PEO's recently updated volunteer website explains the role of volunteering to overall operations and directs would-be recruits to the latest opportunities.

most qualified candidates is sent for approval to the committee chair or whole committee for final selection.

Fern Gonçalves, CHRL, director of people development at PEO, reminds members that recruiting volunteers for some committee and task force work can be competitive. "Many times, the committees are looking for specific competencies, not just labour," she tells *Engineering Dimensions*. "This requires us to look for the volunteer with the right combination of skills and experience. Some potential volunteers might be disappointed when they offer their services to PEO but don't get selected for a specific committee. We have to let members know that there may be limited opportunity on a specific committee, but we keep all applications on file in our volunteer database for future volunteer opportunities."

PEO has more than 30 established committees and five task forces currently in operation. This is over and above the board committees that are generally staffed by sitting members of council.

In keeping with the stepped-up outreach to members looking to support the regulator in its administrative and governance roles, in 2012 PEO launched a volunteer website (<http://forum.peo.on.ca/PEOVAA/Volunteer/VolunteeringHome.aspx>), which is now seen as the most effective recruitment tool. As of late August, there were 40 openings listed on the volunteer website. While most of these are for chapter-related positions, there are vacancies on such committees as the Academic Requirements and Consulting Engineer Designation committees.

Closely allied with recruitment work are PEO's moves to promote the leadership development potential of volunteerism. Benefits accru-

ing to volunteers at PEO include a sense of serving the engineering profession while sharing knowledge and experience with professional peers. Volunteers also promote and advance the engineering profession by reaching out to local communities. This latter point is especially seen by volunteers who get involved with their local chapters and the Government Liaison Program (GLP).

Some of the work of the people development department is assisted by PEO's Advisory Committee on Volunteers (ACV), which supports the training needs of PEO volunteers in accordance with human resources plans developed by and for committees and task forces.

Other objectives for the ACV include the enhancement of volunteer training and recognition programs; developing effective protocols for ACV's interactions with council, the registrar and other committees and task force advisors; and improving communications between ACV, all volunteers and PEO membership.

The ACV also identifies general knowledge and skills that PEO volunteers require in support of their volunteer work. To that end, the committee maintains tools for volunteer training and provides a means to recognize volunteers and their employers.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

At least two PEO bodies—the Human Resources Committee and the ACV—have also been involved in discussions related to member turnover and succession planning. The ACV, for example, is partway through a review of the *Committees and Task Forces Policy—Reference Guide*, which states that “committees, through their council-approved terms of reference, will determine the duration and limits on the number of years members of the committee can serve, including any limits on consecutive terms in the same position.”

Individual volunteers at PEO are quick to recognize not only the benefits of volunteering on behalf of the profession, but also the importance of PEO devoting some resources to leadership development.

Gabriel Tse, P.Eng., is chair of the Grand River Chapter’s GLP committee, and he serves as vice chair of the association’s Government Relations Committee (GLC). He is also a long-time volunteer with the Grand River Chapter. Through the government relations activities, Tse helps promote the work of PEO and engineering to his provincial member of parliament and to other stakeholders in the community.

Tse, principal of Lycath Technical Sales in Kitchener, Ontario, is one PEO volunteer who recognizes the mutual benefits to the individual and organization when it comes to volunteerism.

“It makes a tremendous difference to be able to network and build contacts by getting involved in these kinds of committees,” he says. “Working with GLC and various GLP chairs provided me with the opportunity to learn from different engineers of various specialties and backgrounds. I probably would not have had the chance to meet them otherwise. This is obviously not a direct enhancement of my technical capabilities, but gives me the chance to broaden my way of thinking and handling a problem.”

Newer PEO members are also quick to take up the volunteer cause. Priscilla Williams, EIT, of the Windsor-Essex Chapter, came to volunteer work at the invitation of PEO’s Education Committee. She is now heavily involved in the planning and preparation of the annual Education Conference, held each May at PEO headquarters in Toronto.



Peter Broad, P.Eng., FEC, has dedicated countless hours of volunteer service to PEO primarily through his work with the Repeal of the Industrial Exception Task Force.

“I wasn’t actually involved in my local chapter when I began volunteering,” Williams says. “I applied for a vacant volunteer position at the recommendation of my graduate supervisor, who saw the call for applications and brought the posting to my attention, feeling that I would be a good fit based on my experiences and long-term interests.”

Williams says longer-serving members have been instrumental in encouraging new members to volunteer. “I didn’t undergo specific leadership training when I began volunteering, but have been well-supported by my fellow volunteers when taking on new roles and responsibilities,” she says. “Generally speaking, I feel that natural turnover within, and expansion of, the committee has ensured a good balance of experienced and fresh perspectives during my time as a volunteer. I’m the EIT member on the Education Committee and we have a student member as well, so there is also a good mix of experiences in the profession at the table.”

President Comrie also recognizes that organizations making use of volunteer efforts have certain obligations of their own. “Taking the concept of leadership development even further, we [PEO] have an opportunity to give something back to our dedicated volunteers by investing in their leader-

PEO's people development team introduced the volunteer service recognition pin program in 2011. Here, long-time volunteer Comodore Ravindran, PhD, P.Eng., FEC (centre), shows off his pin for 15 years of service with the Experience Requirements Committee (ERC). Also pictured are (left to right) Pauline Lebel, P.Eng., manager of licensure, Michael Price, P.Eng., FEC, deputy registrar, licensing and registration, Santosh Gupta, PhD, P.Eng., FEC, ERC chair and lieutenant governor-appointed councillor to PEO council, and David Kiguel, P.Eng., vice chair of ERC.



ship development in terms of 'soft' skills such as facilitation, conflict resolution, team dynamics, and so on," Comrie said at the April 30 annual general meeting.

"I am pleased to be able to tell you that we have funds set aside to begin development of a series of online modules that will cover the important background information needed by new PEO volunteers. My hope is that we can eventually build a comprehensive leadership development program that includes some hands-on workshop modules as well. This initiative will help to ensure PEO has an adequate pool of skilled volunteer leaders for purposes of leadership succession. And the leadership skills our volunteers acquire will benefit them in their work and personal lives as well."

In his remarks, the PEO president also said volunteer organizations such as PEO make "excellent incubators" for leadership development skills. "The reason is simple: we can't force volunteers to do anything. We can only inspire and empower them to work for shared common goals. We can only show them the way by example. So I would be remiss if I did not take this opportunity to thank all of you for your commitment to PEO and for your support of our common goal—the strengthening of our great profession, and the betterment of the public we serve." Σ

Recognition programs highlight special role for volunteers

PEO has been active with efforts to recognize and reward volunteers who commit a portion of their professional working lives to supporting the engineering regulator.

One of the longstanding volunteer recognition activities is the annual Order of Honour awards program, which recognizes professional engineers and others who have rendered conspicuous service to the engineering profession.

PEO also recognizes volunteers who have served on chapters, committees and task forces, or PEO council, and celebrates achievements of milestone years of service. One of the more recent additions to PEO's volunteer service program is the recognition pin, awarded to those with five, 15 and 20 years of work on behalf of the regulator (Engineers Canada's fellowship pin recognizes 10 years of service). The service pin program was established in 2011, and over the past five years has awarded more than 730 pins to committee, task force and chapter volunteers. A special sterling-silver pin is also presented to volunteers with 25 or more years of service.

In April, then PEO President Thomas Chong, P.Eng., FEC, issued a special statement as part of the regulator's recognition of National Volunteer Week: "The theme of National Volunteer Week 2016 emphasizes the similarities between those who graciously donate their time and ideas to help grow their communities with a seedling growing into a tree," Chong said. "Thanks to volunteers, our communities grow strong and resilient. Even the tiniest volunteer effort leaves a profound and lasting trace in a community, much like tree rings that appear over time. And I can think of no better example of the value and importance of volunteerism than is displayed every day at Professional Engineers Ontario."