PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Defining scopes of practice

GEORGE R. COMRIE, P.ENG.
PRESIDENT

This issue's theme of the Engineering Team is timely. It has long been recognized that engineers do not generally work in isolation, but rather in collaboration with other professionals and technical specialists. Among the best-known members of the engineering team are architects and engineering technologists and technicians, with whom our scopes of practice often overlap to some extent. As a result of this, our respective professional bodies have over the years developed close and cooperative working relationships.

With the coming of age of disciplines like software engineering and bioengineering, the boundaries of the "engineering space" have expanded to encompass other disciplines, such as computer science, biology, ecology, and medicine. More and more we find ourselves working alongside others with very different knowledge and skill sets. These individuals are not part of the engineering profession, and would not qualify for licensure as professional engineers under our current criteria. Nevertheless, they generally support standards of competence, practice, and ethics, just as we do. In some cases, they have organized to establish certification regimes and reserved designations, such as the Information Systems Professional (ISP) designation administered in Ontario by the Canadian Information Processing Society (CIPS). As these groups (which we have come to refer to as "external groups") evolve, it is only natural that they will aspire to their own restricted areas of practice, which may well overlap those of existing or new engineering disciplines. Government and the public may support the need for protection in these areas of practice, just as they have in the traditional engineering disciplines.

This poses a problem for our traditional engineering licensing model–the "one size fits all" P.Eng. licence. In this model, a given activity either falls within the sphere of engineering, in which case only a licensed professional engineer can do it (i.e. oversee and take responsibility for it), or it doesn't, in which case anyone can do it. Neither case may be appropriate. In the public interest, there may well be a need to restrict a certain practice to "qualified individuals," and qualified individuals may include those other than licensed professional engineers. Moreover, all licensed engineers are assumed to be equally competent to do any engineering activity that they agree to undertake, since we do not license by discipline or scope of practice. It could therefore be argued that the public is not adequately protected under this model.

Recognizing that some activities that need to be regulated do not fit neatly within one professional group's purview–or maybe within any professional group's purview–governments have taken to regulating these activities through activity-specific legislation like the Building Regulatory Reform Advisory Group (BRRAG) recommendations now being implemented in Ontario through Bill 124, the *Building Code Statute Law Amendment Act*. Such regulations call into question the adequacy of the qualifications of professionals licensed to protect the public by substituting an additional regulatory scheme under which a licensed professional can take responsibility for the work in question only so long as he or she complies with a knowledge-based qualification process and a work-product-approval process. As compared to professional self-regulation, such regulatory schemes increase costs to the public but do not afford any increased public protection.

I believe there are two things we must do quickly to deal proactively with the situation I am describing. The first is to define scopes of practice for the major activities of professional engineers, and to license our members accordingly. Under such a regime, all members of the profession, even those not currently practising engineering at all, would retain the P.Eng. title as well as the rights and responsibilities associated with membership in a self-regulating profession. Those practising engineering within one or more defined scopes of practice would have to demonstrate current competence in each such area. This is a major undertaking that will involve significant member input, but one on which we must move forward if we are to remain relevant as a regulator in the eyes of both the public and our members.

The second is to hold discussions with external groups (like those I have already mentioned) representing individuals who do work related to engineering scopes of practice, with a view to defining joint scopes and standards of practice for those areas of common interest. I can advise you that our Software Engineering Task Force, chaired by former President Peter DeVita, P.Eng., has been engaged in this kind of fruitful discussion with representatives of CIPS Ontario for over a year now. Such discussions may lead to licensing of members of external groups under our legislation (similar to the limited licences we currently grant to engineering technologists and others), or to cooperation in the creation of new classes of licence to be administered by PEO or by other organizations. Whatever form this may take, I believe we can achieve much better solutions for both the public and the engineering profession by being proactive now, rather than by waiting for a situation to arise in which the public demands quick regulatory action.

If we wish to demonstrate the continued viability of the self-governing profession as a means of regulating technical activities in the public interest, we must increase the level of detail with which we regulate our practising members to take into account each member's scopes of practice and the member's currency in them. At the same time, we must expand our borders to accommodate other professional or would-be professional groups whose scopes of practice overlap ours or are closely related to ours.