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Concepts of Professionalism

Position Paper

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FOREWORD

An APEGGA guideline presents procedures and practices that are recommended by APEGGA. In general, an APEGGA member should conform to the recommendations in order to be practising in accordance with what is deemed to be acceptable practice. Variations may be made to accommodate special circumstances if they do not detract from the intent of the guideline.

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1 OVERVIEW

This position paper examines the concept of professionalism supported by the Association of Professional Engineers, Geologists and Geophysicists of Alberta (APEGGA). This is a useful document for the member-in-training who is preparing for admission into the Association, for the new professional who is gaining autonomy and professional recognition, and for the practicing professional who wishes to reinforce professionalism.

With self-regulation, Professional Engineers and Geologists and Geophysicists are granted a fair degree of autonomy, prestige, and influence. It is only through the trust of the public, that they are afforded such autonomy. Professional status should not be taken for granted - others continually struggle for such privileges. However, the privilege of being a self-regulated profession is not without responsibility and associated accountability. To protect the public welfare, professionals must continually conduct themselves to the highest ethical and professional standards. The standard of ethical behaviour supersedes what is considered legal.

If professional standards are not maintained, the privilege of self governance can be revoked. Given recent incidences of misleading financial statements, conflict of interest, and insider trading in the U.S., self governance has effectively been revoked for the accounting profession. The Public Company Accounting Oversight Board was established to directly report to the Security Exchange Commission (SEC).¹ In New Zealand, the public demanded higher standards of professional conduct following controversy with leaky homes and structurally unsound buildings. A statutory body was established to oversee the registration, the code of ethics, and the complaints and disciplinary processes of the Institution of Professional Engineers New Zealand.²

1.1 Scope

This document discusses the professionalism ideal by answering the following questions: What is professionalism? What are the implications for APEGGA members and their actions? What are the challenges to professionalism? How can professionalism be encouraged?

The privileges granted to engineers, geologists and geophysicists - self-regulation, technical and professional independence, and the public's trust - require APEGGA members to uphold the highest standards of professional behaviour. Professionalism is an often misused term. Yet, this should not denigrate its value to members.

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this guideline is to emphasize the importance to those considering careers in the professions; for engineering, geology, and geophysics students; for recent graduates; and for practicing engineers, geologists and geophysicists to conduct

¹ Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002.

² Chartered Professional Engineers of New Zealand Act 2002 replaced Engineers Registration Act 1924.

themselves professionally and to fulfill their obligation to the public, employers, clients, peers, the profession, and themselves.

2 WHAT IS PROFESSIONALISM?

Early use of "professional" meant a commitment to a certain way of life. The verb "profess" meant to be received formally into a religious community such as a monk who takes monastic vows in a religious order.³ It implied a public avowal to follow a path of high moral ideals. By the late seventeenth century, the word became more secular in meaning and expanded beyond religion. "Professional" included those who were qualified to pursue a vocation or calling. Law, medicine, and engineering became professions because they required professed knowledge, shared values and wisdom, and a fiduciary relationship with others.

A more contemporary and comprehensive definition of professional is:

A calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive preparation including instruction in skills and methods as well as in the scientific, historical, or scholarly principles underlying such skills and methods, maintaining by force or organization or concerned opinion high standards of achievement and conduct, and committing its members to continued study and to a kind of work which has for its prime purpose the rendering of a public service⁴.

2.1 Specialized Technical Knowledge

The expertise of the Professional Engineer, Geologist, and Geophysicist stems from having command of an extensive body of knowledge. The knowledge required is highly specialized and often abstract and theoretical, requiring lengthy instruction in the underlying scientific and historical principles. Significant knowledge is also acquired through years of work experience. The practice of a profession requires the exercise of reasoned judgement in the application of this knowledge. Professionals are frequently required to make judgements based on knowledge and understanding of a situation. Often, there are a variety of factors and several acceptable solutions when solving problems. Decision-makers must be able to identify and evaluate all possible alternatives, considering that many persons can be significantly affected by the ultimate decisions taken.

Professional associations define the technical knowledge required for the profession, often through academic and experience requirements. This body of knowledge is specific, and generally unknown by other professions, occupations, and society. Thus, professionals tend to receive less supervision and be technically autonomous. Those without this knowledge are unable to determine whether the work is good, adequate or poor. Low levels of supervision necessitate a high degree of trust in professionals that they will govern themselves with the public interest as paramount.

³ *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, Unabridged.* 1988, Merriam-Webster, Inc.

⁴ *Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged.* 1993, Merriam-Webster, Inc.

2.2 Maintaining Standards through Self-Governing Organizations

Governments delegate the responsibility to regulate professional matters to the "profession" itself. By accepting legal and ethical responsibility, self-governance of the professions is possible. This not only protects the society that the professional provides services to, but also encourages pride of workmanship, productivity, individual responsibility, self-discipline, ethical standards and public interest.

APEGGA is entrusted to ensure that all members and permit holders are responsible and accountable for practicing in a professional manner – ethically, competently and in compliance with the Engineering, Geological and Geophysical Professions (EGGP) Act.

This self-regulation and mutual accountability within the fraternity, association and peers must be stringent, so that they are always seen to merit societal trust. “Have I represented the profession well? Do I expect professional behaviour from my cohorts?” If each member of a working group is highly professional, it elevates the professionalism of the entire group.

Conduct is characterized by responsible performance and dedication to service is evident in the application made of his or her special position of technical privilege. In the pursuit of professionalism, the individual's preservation of personal integrity and credibility are of the highest order. The professional must have the capability to understand complex issues, make proper appraisals and judgements, behave ethically and with trust, show discretion; and realize the implications of decisions.

Technical and professional conduct standards are set, revised, and maintained by professionals and their self-regulating agencies. Such standards may be provincial, national, or global and address issues of:

- Certification and licensure - ensuring only properly qualified members are allowed to practice and that they do so according to professional standards.
- Code of Ethics - holding protection of the public from unethical and/or incompetent practice in highest esteem.
- Technical requirements – ensuring that professionals adequately protect public safety
- Continuing competence – concerning personal professional development and adherence to standards and guidelines in all areas of professional practice.
- Regulation and control – enforcing against non-licensed and non-qualified persons and reviewing the practice of licensed members and permit holders.
- Discipline – disciplining members who fail to comply with proper standards of practice and conduct.

As they are a self-governed profession, it is the responsibility of professionals to ensure that these standards are revised, updated, and enforced as required.

2.3 Continued Study

To continually protect the public, it is essential for professionals to engage in lifelong learning such as sustained study of professional ethics and technical issues by reading journals or attending technical courses, seminars, and conferences. Professionals identify with the professed body of knowledge and are willing to expend time and energy to keep up to date with it, promote its growth, expansion, development and use in the

service of society. Generally, they also identify strongly with other members of the profession. Peer approval of demonstrated expertise and commitment to the profession is a significant source of satisfaction and pride.

Further, the demonstration of continuing competency fulfills the increasing demands from the public for greater accountability. The standard established for continued competence for each discipline is normally determined by a reasonable and competent group of peers. The standard is dynamic and changes over time as new techniques, practices, and materials are accepted.

2.4 Public Service

Professional members shall, in their areas of practice, hold paramount the health, safety and welfare of the public, and have regard for the environment.⁵ Members are accountable for their own professional practice, for the professional practice of those under their supervision, and for their profession generally as part of their service to society. This public-interest bias must take precedence over self-interest. Protection of the public from unethical and/or incompetent practice is held in highest esteem. The APEGGA document "Guideline for Ethical Practice V2.0" provides an amplification and interpretation of the Code of Ethics, complete with illustrative case studies.

For effective pursuit of their work, professional members depend upon their credibility to the client or employer in their technical competence and the confidence of the public at large in their character and integrity to serve society. This imposes a duty upon the profession and upon individuals to justify the trust they enjoy from the public, clients, or employers in both their technical ability and ethical behaviour. Professionals must understand that meeting the minimum standard is insufficient, and instead strive for better. For professionalism to have real impact, service should rate, whenever possible, "excellent", or at the very least "above average".

Finally, the professional's public service duty extends beyond what the Code of Ethics requires. Professionals should continually strive to give back to society through service on public bodies that draw on professional expertise (i.e. planning boards, development appeal boards, investigative commissions, review panels or community building committees). They may also participate in activities that contribute to the community which require professional and ethical behaviour, but not necessarily the application of technical knowledge - including active service for charitable, community, religious or service organizations, coaching league sports teams, or elected public service on municipal, provincial or federal levels or school boards.

3 CHALLENGES FOR THE PROFESSIONAL

3.1 Public Mistrust of Professionals

A major challenge for the Professional Engineer, Geologists, and Geophysicist is the growing public mistrust of professionals. The public has opinions on the trustworthiness

⁵ *Code of Ethics*. APEGGA, 2003.

of professions and institutions, which determines how they interact with and rely upon them. A Canadian poll shows that the public trusts: ⁶

1. doctors
2. pharmacists
3. engineers
4. teachers
5. architects
6. accountants
7. lawyers

Professionals must recognize that trust is carefully conferred and must be protected. Trust is fragile and easily lost. Yet, they can't serve the public or even clients, if their professional judgments aren't trusted. Maintenance of trust in the profession is a necessary pre-requisite for the privilege of self-governance.

3.2 Appearance of being Elitist

Professionals and the professions are often categorized as "elitist". This label is characteristically attached to those who promote professionalism especially if the promoter includes him or herself while excluding others.

Members of an elite have high standards and a high level of competence. These concepts are also part of the concept of professionalism. In addition, the meaning of 'elite' and especially of the words 'elitist' and 'elitism' have taken on the meanings of arrogance, smugness and self-satisfaction. Elitists are widely perceived to feel that they are better than others from a human worth point of view - which is completely at odds with the concept of professionalism.

Instead, an exclusive scope of practice depends upon a full understanding of the implication of various decisions; it is only possible because of knowledge resident in the members of the profession. This is the reason that responsibility for carrying out these functions is given to formal associations of members such as APEGGA.

3.3 Appearance of the Profession as a Monopoly

A monopoly of any kind is viewed with disfavour because directors of a monopoly can control prices, the quality of product or service, the distribution of product or service, and limit "membership" and competition. It may be argued that professions are internally controlled monopolies because only members may legally supply services and there is no alternate source for the public (i.e. only Professional Geologists can practice geology - if customers want geology work done, they must get it from a P.Geol.).

Those who claim the professions are abusing their monopoly cite high incomes and high status of professionals. Their suggested remedy is to remove the right of self-governance. This is an inaccurate assessment of the professions and the role of professional associations. The aim of a professional association is to protect public

⁶ Ipsos Reid commissioned by Ontario Society of Professional Engineers, November 2001. AvailableURL:http://www.canadianconsultingengineer.com/common_scripts/dailynews/print_version.asp?id=6290

welfare by regulating the practice of engineering, geology and geophysics. To ensure quality service, APEGGA registers professionals to ensure internal discipline and adherence to the Code of Ethics. A danger arises when the temptation to provide minimum quality service at a high cost to the client or employer is too great to resist. APEGGA agrees that professionals who fail their duty to provide service at a competitive cost should be brought to task.

Status and compensation are related to an individual's level of responsibility. This includes the breadth and depth of knowledge required for the job; the impact of decisions made by the professional on the health and profitability of the organization; the frequency of making reasoned judgements, which is different from following planned or routine procedures; and the length of time and amount of effort needed to train a replacement. Because professionals are paid in accordance to their responsibility level, their status and compensation will be reasonably above most occupational groups.

Other critics state that the professionals' monopoly is being used in a protectionist manner to restrict access by qualified, internationally trained engineers, geologists and geophysicists. This is not the intent. The professional association's intent is to protect public welfare by ensuring only properly qualified members are allowed to practice. Many jurisdictions have implemented initiatives to increase the accessibility of licensure to internationally trained professionals and inclusion of qualified persons. These initiatives include beginning the licensing process prior to immigration or assisting in the achievement of the required one year of Canadian experience through co-op placements or provisional licensure.

3.4 More Demanding Public Expectations

Public expectations of professionals have greatly increased. Many people feel they are entitled to immediate and faultless diagnosis, prescription, action and results at a very low cost. Yet, to achieve this in every case is unrealistic. Critics of the profession assume that the association is not being vigilant in disciplining and removing incompetent and unethical members. As a result, the gap between the public's expectations of professional services and the actual deliverables is growing.

Therefore, it is imperative that recipients of professional services are informed of the legal, ethical and practical limitations of the service provided and the responsibilities of those providing the service. This information can be provided through general documents such as practice standards or guidelines, through more targeted campaigns, or specifically in service contracts and company information.

3.5 Increasing Complexity and Specialization

Another challenge is the popular method of increasing human efficiency through the specialization of tasks. On large complicated jobs, the work is broken into smaller segments and divided among employees, instead of a single person carrying out every segment of the project. This creates repetition of tasks. As this occurs, the need for an extensive range of knowledge and reasoned judgements declines and it allows an easier replacement of employees. Combined with a greater loss of autonomy, it may hinder the career development and progress of a professional, especially if the employer does not adhere to the concepts of professionalism.

Responsible members must be ensure that the management, organization, and apportioning of responsibilities amongst professional members is conducive to professional practice and development. Further, professionals must continuously develop their 'soft' skills - such as communication, team work, and supportive supervision – to ensure that they positively influence the functioning of their organization.

3.6 Accountable to Multiple Constituents

There are many levels and methods of accountability, such as to:

- public through services provided with a feedback loop through the courts and issues of safety and liability,
- regulator through enforcement of legislation and regulations,
- self and profession through the Code of Ethics ensuring ethical behaviour and skilled practice,
- employer/client/supervisor through the employment contract, and
- shareholders through the market place.

Further, although professionals are not accountable to insurers per se, their actions are influenced and controlled by insurers through insurance policies and the premiums charged.

Of these various constituents, the employer/client-employee relationship is especially influential on technical autonomy and the context of the professional's work. In the professional-client model, the professional is relatively autonomous to choose which clients to serve, when, how, and what to charge, etc. But in the employer-employee model, the professional's autonomy may decrease. Employers prefer to control when, to whom, and under what conditions their employees provide services. They also judge the performance of employees. Employers strongly influence the field of standards, ethics and competence that may affect a professional employee's ability to maintain a high professional standing. Thus, the characteristics that identify a professional – autonomy, commitment, identification and ethics – are affected because the professional answers directly to the employer, and less frequently to the client and professional association.

Whether professionals members are employers, supervisors, clients or employees in this equation, they are reminded that there may be competing or contradictory demands to be considered. Professionals are reminded of the Code of Ethics when considering the various constituents.

4 ENCOURAGING PROFESSIONALISM

These challenges may be addressed and professionalism encouraged through mentoring, involvement in technical or professional societies, and through the promotion of corporate professional responsibility.

4.1 Mentoring

Mentoring facilitates the transfer of knowledge and skills from more to less experienced professionals. A comprehensive mentoring relationship would facilitate the development and reinforcement of technical knowledge, managerial skills, organizational knowledge, and ethical reasoning. The mentor should act as a role model of professionalism and

ask him or herself: "What can I do to exhibit professionalism? Have I lived up to the Code of Ethics day by day? Am I proud to call myself a Professional Engineer/Geologist/Geophysicist? Have I demonstrated expertise and commitment to the growth and development of the profession?"

4.2 Involvement in Professional and Technical Societies

Active involvement in professional and technical societies contributes to the technical body of knowledge and maintenance of competence. Such societies may also increase awareness in following professional and ethical standards. Further, the ongoing networking and mentoring reinforces the professionalism of the group.

4.3 Professional Responsibility and Organizational Responsibility

The maintenance of professionalism will further encourage investment of public trust in organizations, corporations, and industry. Employers are best served by treating employees equitably. All occupations - technical, managerial, creative - flourish in an atmosphere of respect, challenge and accomplishment, good communication and teamwork, work-life balance, and job security.⁷ Organizations should set realistic workplace policies that include fair performance appraisals, financial and intrinsic compensation for job contributions, and that prevent the abuse of professionalism.

Employers who encourage professional employees to maintain a high level of professionalism will reap solid returns in loyalty, productivity and morale. It is essential that an organization's management recognize each engineer, geologist or geophysicist as an individual who has been professionally trained, is very competent, and is usually of higher than average individuality. This type of employee, in spite of his or her technical background, cannot be considered as a thinking machine, but as an individual who has career and job satisfaction goals. These goals may include the need for personal achievement, opportunities for advancement, a satisfactory salary level based on contribution to the organization, and to be considered as an individual of stature among his or her colleagues. It is the responsibility of the employer to show recognition of professionalism in employees and support careers which will give adequate challenge.

However, a supportive climate is seriously compromised when organizational needs and professional responsibility conflict. A policy which elaborates a conflict resolution procedure is useful in this context. The policy should indicate that the professional employee is not required to agree, sign or approve technical documents or procedures if professional ethics are at stake. Such policies should be discussed in permit holder's Professional Practice Management Plan.⁸

Other abuses of professionalism include excessive overtime with no compensation, using professionals to keep the organization running during a strike or lock-out, locating the professional in isolated areas without consideration of personal factors such as family commitments, or reducing job skills and responsibility where reasoned judgements are seldom required.

⁷ Lowe, Graham S. and Grant Schellenberg "Employees' Basic Value Proposition: Strong HR Strategies Must Address Work Values", *Canadian HR Reporter*, July 15, 2002 as extracted from *CPRN-Ekos Changing Employment Relationships Survey 2000*.

⁸ *Guideline for Professional Practice Management Plans*. APEGGA, 2003.

Professional Engineers, Geologists, and Geophysicists may be required to join a union, as a condition of employment. In the case of strike or lockout, the professionals' duty to their employer takes precedence over their duty to the union. The Guideline for Ethical Practice states that professionals should act as faithful agents of their employers - faithfully discharging their responsibilities to clients/employers, always acting with fairness and justice to all.⁹

The professional's primary responsibility is to protect the welfare of the public, regardless if the professional is paid. This responsibility is not reduced or diminished when the professional provides service to the public through an employer. In some organizations, APEGGA members are the only employees who have a legal obligation to protect the public interest. Therefore, employers must encourage professional employees to come forward with the potential consequences if other authorities overrule their professional judgement on technical or ethical issues.¹⁰

Unfortunately, this may bring professionals face-to-face with company loyalty versus professional responsibility. The stakes rise when they take a professional stance and their career is negatively affected by the decision. In this situation professionals must ask themselves: "Am I right? Is it important to stand firm?" Professionals must ensure that appropriate action or notification of proper authorities occurs in any instance where they believe that public safety or the environment is endangered, or where required by relevant legislation, approvals or orders.

Recent incidents in technology, energy, and other companies indicate that the price of remaining silent or inactive in the face of unethical behaviour can be very costly for both the corporation and the individual.¹¹ Professionals share corporate responsibility for the quality of products and services delivered. Further, in Canadian legislation an individual can be deemed to be a party to an offence if he or she acquiesced in the commission of the offence.

These questions accompany the professional, whether a consultant or an employee, when accepting professional status and are best answered using reasoned judgement from accumulated knowledge and experience. Recognizing ethical dilemmas and determining the actions to address them are important skills for professionals. APEGGA can assist the professional in making ethically sound decisions.

4.4 From Professional Engineer, Geologist or Geophysicist to Professional Manager

The path in career progression may lead from technical to management. It is typical to begin a career in a technical role. It is important for the young engineer, geologist or geophysicist to initially treat an employer like a client to develop a professional relationship. In due course, the employer will gain confidence to consider the employee as a professional advisor.

⁹ *Guideline for Ethical Practice*. APEGGA, 2003.

¹⁰ *Guideline for Ethical Practice*. APEGGA, 2003.

¹¹ Perlow, Leslie and Stephanie Williams. "Is Silence Killing Your Company?" *Havard Business Review*, May 2003, pp. 52-58.

As his or her career progresses, the professional may face a decision whether to continue pursuing a technical career or turn to management. The skills and knowledge of a manager are different from those of a Professional Engineer, Geologist or Geophysicist. Although the professional is committed to his or her field of technical expertise and knowledge, there will be less practice of engineering, geology or geophysics and more preoccupation with managing people and system issues. This requires the professional to develop a broader range of non-technical skills, such as 'public consultation' which goes well beyond communication skills. However, this does not exempt the individual from ethical and professional practice. In fact, maintenance of high standards becomes even more imperative.

5 SUMMARY

The rights and privileges granted to engineers, geologists, and geophysicists such as self-regulation, technical independence, and public trust depends upon the maintenance of professionalism. Each professional member is responsible to uphold the highest standards of professional and ethical behaviour for service to the public, for him or herself, for peers, and for the profession.