

In today's context, how do the values of our profession fit into our everyday lives?

There certainly has been water under the bridge since Canadian engineers established the Civil Engineers of Canada. The year was 1887 and it marked the beginning of a long history of engineers coming together to form groups that would lead to the creation, in 1920, of the Québec Corporation of Professional Engineers, predecessor to the Ordre des ingénieurs du Québec. In 1924, the Corporation adopted its first code of ethics. This was done fifty years before the Professional Code came into force, that is to say fifty years before professional orders in Québec were legally obliged to adopt a code of ethics. Clearly, Québec engineers understood long ago that professional credibility and the quality of professional guidance go hand in hand!

In fact, a person who has grown up and studied in another country must face a number of issues if he or she wishes to practise engineering in Québec; he or she must examine, understand and master our society's culture and values, our professional values, the reasons underlying professional guidance and structure, and our working conditions. Such are considerable challenges one must face while dealing with the everyday issues of adapting to one's host society...

A QUESTION OF HONOUR...

It bears reminding that being member of a profession has long been seen as a privilege reserved for society's elite. Few were those who could aspire to reach such a status. Professionals had every reason to show how proud they were of their title. In return, they had to fulfill this important social role with great dignity. This was a question of honour. Such a word might seem old-fashioned in today's modern times but it adequately conveys a sentiment which has not gone out of style: the feeling of deserving the public's respect and maintaining one's self-esteem.

This sense of honour was expected of all professionals much like the knights of the Middle Ages were expected to prove themselves worthy of their title and rise to their social standing. That being said, not all professionals – nor all knights – measured up to those expectations. Nothing was more contemptible than a knight who abused of his power against peasants and poor folk, unable to defend themselves on equal terms. By lowering himself to that level and carrying out such disgraceful acts, this individual discredited other knights as well. By acting this way, he no longer deserved to belong to the brotherhood of knights.

At its inception, professionalism based itself on these values, that is to say pride, dignity, merit and honour. What can be more normal given that professional matters deal first and foremost with a power that could be abused?

TIMES HAVE CHANGED BUT AN ETHICAL CONDUCT REMAINS A VALUE OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE!

Obviously, times have changed in many respects and the reality of the engineering practice has been considerably transformed. On the

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one hand, areas of practice in engineering have become so diversified that one might speak of a veritable breaking out of the profession. Consequently, the types of training required are more and more different and the duties performed by engineers are just as diverse (design, execution and performance, operations, maintenance, distribution, management, business development, counselling, supervision and control, assessment, etc.). In this context, many will ask what, if anything, still holds the profession together.

On the other hand, while the majority of engineers are employees, the practice of engineering originally focused around private practice, wherein engineers have a direct relationship with their clients. For employee engineers, their clients are their employers. This deeply alters the professional relationship. In a traditional practice, the client is in a vulnerable position with respect to the services rendered by the engineer, such that the professional relationship is based on trust. When the client is one's employer, the relationship of trust is governed by an employment agreement. The engineer's professional autonomy is therefore limited. Engineers will often be expected to act solely in their employer's best interest, even if this means infringing one's duties and obligations towards the public. To whom do employee engineers owe their loyalty? To their employer or to the public, whose security and well-being they must ensure?

In these types of situations, engineers may be tempted to engage in unconventional behaviours; in other words, they may act in a way that violates their code of ethics. The pressure to land contracts and always perform faster as well as the belief that it is imperative that clients are satisfied at any cost can lead engineers to compromise their professional values. It is then, very often, that we start seeing implied agreements, seals being used complacently, projects carried out by engineers who don't necessarily have all the required knowledge or engineers who neglect to take into account the consequences of the performance of their work on the environment and on the life, health and property of every person.

Given the importance of these transformations, how should engineers' professional conduct emulate the values that respond to today's reality?

THE VALUES OF OUR PROFESSION

We emphasized earlier that professionalism was born from values such as pride, dignity, merit and honour. Even though these values have not disappeared, they are not the values that best characterize professionalism in modern times. Today, engineering draws on four fundamental values namely, competence, sense of ethics, responsibility and social commitment. In short, competence relates to mastering the know-how associated with a particular field as well as being able to adequately use one's practical judgement and efficiently apply one's acquired knowledge; a sense of ethics implies that engineers put the public's and their clients' interests before their own, and act in compliance with their conscience as true professionals; responsibility infers that one will fulfill his or her duty to be accountable for one's choices and actions, which means holding society and one's clients harmless against their work; as for social commitment, this value reminds engineers that they can help society make clearer choices by practising their profession competently, responsibly and ethically.

ETHICS AND VALUES

Confusing the values of our profession with professional ethics is a common mistake. Both are different yet complete one another.

Ethics or rules of professional conduct are a set of duties and obligations imposed upon professionals during the course of their practice. They are the rules that are put in place to ensure the

public's protection, first and foremost, and to set out guidelines with respect to the professional's relations with his or her clients as well as with the profession itself. Values are different in nature. They move people to act in one way over another. For example, an individual who values honesty is compelled to tell the truth, even in situations where he or she might profit from lying. Values are part of a person; they transpire through one's actions, words and attitudes. They will guide engineers in how they understand and comply with their ethical duties and obligations. If a person's values are incompatible with professionalism, this person is not likely to apply rules of ethics correctly. We can require someone to respect rules of ethics under penalty of law and subject to mechanisms to that effect put in place in every professional order. However, we cannot compel a person to adopt certain values, or to make it so that they become second nature for this person, given that the issue is not to obey these values but rather to share their meaning in order to act professionally in all circumstances. Not unlike knights sharing values like pride and honour...

Engineering deserves the public's confidence through its respect for values and ethics. In an era in which we put the emphasis on profitability, providing a greater return for shareholders and client satisfaction, how can engineers incorporate their professional values into their everyday lives? In an upcoming article, we will explore how to maintain an ethical conduct while faced with conflicting values. To be continued ...

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