



Socially responsible engineers

Three examples not to follow

Did you know that engineers have distinct social responsibilities that apply to them even more than the contractual context of a mandate?

EXTENDED RESPONSIBILITY: WHY?

Engineers have specific expertise and extensive fields of practice. Moreover, their work has a potential impact on humankind, living conditions, technology, the environment as well as human health and property. For all these reasons, engineers are required to practice their profession with a broader vision than just their clients' interests.

For instance, to comply with section 2.01 of their code of ethics, engineers must choose working methods that not only uphold the laws and regulations in force,

but also protect the environment and the life, health and property of people, and are in keeping with the common interest of society.

Does this mean that engineers have an ethical obligation to give priority to the common interest whenever it conflicts with their client's interest? Absolutely! Here are some situations where engineers neglected this obligation and ended up before the OIQ's Disciplinary Council.



YOU NEED TO ACT QUICKLY¹

A city began to repair and extend a road for economic development purposes. Two of the responsibilities that were to be carried out by the engineer in charge of designing the project included determining the necessary environmental studies and obtaining the required permits and authorizations.

However, his client, the Municipality, ran the risk of losing its funding if the work did not begin as soon as possible and pressured the engineer to act quickly. When obtaining authorizations to start the work as quickly as possible, the engineer failed to inform the competent authorities that the layout of the proposed road affected watercourses and wetlands, and he authorized the work to start before he had received authorization from Québec's ministry of the environment.

In its decision, the Disciplinary Council felt that the engineer had failed to meet his environmental obligations because he chose to close his eyes and give priority to his client's interests. To fulfill his professional and social duties, he should have erred on the side of caution by taking the time required for the environmental issues, despite the risk of missing the deadline for the funding.

WHAT REGULATION?²

To obtain a residential construction permit, a citizen had to provide the City with septic system plans and specifications that had been signed by an engineer.

The engineer hired by the citizen was not really familiar with the regulation in force, but still signed and sealed the septic system plans. Because he did not have all the information he required, he failed to make the required checks and meet the standards. The consequence: If the work had been completed, it would have been hazardous to the environment. The Municipality considered the plans incomplete and rejected them.

Engineers must practice their profession with a broader vision than just their clients' interests.

The Disciplinary Council found that this engineer had shown unacceptable negligence and lacked diligence by not properly informing his client. He had not considered the impact of the work on the environment and his actions seemed to have been dictated by obtaining the construction permit for his client.

CARELESS WITH HIS SIGNATURE³

The Prime Vert program offers grants to farmers who want to improve their production methods and make them more environmentally friendly. In one such project, an engineer signed a supervision form and a certificate of compliance for the work that had been done. However, not only did he not supervise the work, but he also knew that the work was not consistent with the plans.

Since the drainage steps had not been completed correctly, the ground had not been properly drained, which led to a sub-par harvest. The landowner lost his grant and the environment was not protected.

As a result, the Disciplinary Council felt that the respondent had not taken into account the consequences of his work on the environment or on the property of every person.

In conclusion, when carrying out each project, engineers must exercise judgment and make sure that in all aspects of their work, they respect their obligations towards humans and take into account the consequences of the performance of their work on the environment and on the life, health and property of every person.

But more specifically, what do engineers have to do when the common interests of society and those of their clients are irreconcilable? Find out in the next issue. ◀

1. OIQDC, decision n°. 22-06-0329.
2. OIQDC, decision n°. 22-05-0310.
3. OIQDC, decision n°. 22-15-0487.

“In all aspects of his work, the engineer must respect his obligations towards man and take into account the consequences of the performance of his work on the environment and on the life, health and property of every person.”

(Section 2.01 du Code of Ethics of Engineers)

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