



# Concepts of Professionalism

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The Association of Professional Engineers,  
Geologists and Geophysicists of Alberta

**FOREWORD**

This document is a revision of the document entitled *The Concepts of Professionalism – An APEGGA Statement*, originally issued in 1988. This version takes a more personal and pragmatic view of professionalism, while updating the professionalism model, language, and references.

In general, an APEGGA member should conform to the recommendations in order to be practising in accordance with what is deemed to be professional practice. Variations may be made to accommodate special circumstances if they do not detract from the intent of the document.

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## 1 OVERVIEW

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

With self-governance, 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 we are afforded such autonomy. Professional status should not be taken for granted - others continually struggle for such privileges. However, the privilege of being self-regulated professions is not without responsibility and associated accountability. To protect the public welfare, we must continually conduct ourselves to the highest ethical and professional standards. The standard of ethical behaviour exceeds what is legally required.

The importance of self-governance is not to be underestimated. Aristotle stated that for a society to ensure stability and wellbeing, it depends upon: family and community, health care, education, self-governing professions, and an effective judiciary.<sup>1</sup> Our ability to maintain professional standards to regulate our own professions is necessary for a well functioning society.

### 1.1 SCOPE

This paper discusses the professionalism ideal by answering the following questions: What is professionalism? Why does it matter? As professional members in APEGGA, what are the implications for us and our actions? What are the issues affecting professionalism that must be considered? How can professionalism be encouraged?

### 1.2 PURPOSE

This paper is intended for practicing engineers, geologists and geophysicists; for recent graduates; for engineering, geology, and geophysics students; and for those considering careers in the professions. The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the importance of conducting ourselves professionally in fulfilling our obligation to the public, employers, clients, peers, the profession, and ourselves.

The privileges granted to Professional 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. It is through our daily, individual actions that we can influence the reputation of the professions as a whole.

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1 The Politics of Aristotle. Translated and edited by Barker, E. Oxford University Press, 1946.

### 1.3 REFERENCES

This document should be read in conjunction with the following documents:<sup>2</sup>

*Engineering, Geological and Geophysical Professions Act, Regulations and By-Laws* including *Code Of Ethics*. APEGGA, 2003.

*Guideline for Ethical Practice*. APEGGA, 2003.

*Human Rights Issues in Professional Practice - A Guideline*. APEGGA, 1997.

*Guideline for Professional Practice Management Plans V1.1*. APEGGA, 2003.

## 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 service."<sup>4</sup>

Following is a discussion of each component within this definition.

### 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 possible alternatives, considering that many persons can be significantly affected by the ultimate decisions taken.

Professional associations define the technical knowledge required for acceptance into the profession - often through academic, experience, and related requirements. This body of knowledge is specific, and generally poorly understood by other professions, occupations, and society. Thus, professionals must be able to work without supervision

2 Available URL: <http://www.apegga.org/publications/guidelines.html>

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

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

and be technically autonomous. We accept responsibility and accountability for our work. This necessitates a high degree of trust in us as professionals - that we will govern ourselves with the public interest as paramount.

## 2.2 MAINTAINING STANDARDS THROUGH SELF-GOVERNING ORGANIZATIONS

Governments grant the privilege of self-governance and the associated responsibility to regulate professional matters to selected professions. In Alberta, doctors, lawyers, dentists, veterinarians, accountants, architects, and engineers/geoscientists have been granted self-governance. This is distinct from other groups of workers for which the government retains regulatory authority (e.g., teachers, airline pilots, and trades such as plumbers and electricians).

A key expectation of members of self-governing professions is that we accept legal and ethical responsibility for our work and hold the interest of the public and society as paramount. This not only protects the society to which the professional provides skilled services, 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*.

We institute standards and processes to ensure that members are competent and that the practice of our members is skilled and ethical.

This self-regulation and mutual accountability within the association and among peers must be stringent, so that we 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.

Technical and professional standards of conduct are set, revised, maintained, and enforced by professionals and our self-regulating associations. 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 we 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 protect public safety and well-being, and engage in skilled practice
- 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 professional practice and ethical conduct.

### 2.3 CONTINUED STUDY

To continually protect the public, it is essential for professionals to engage in lifelong learning. The sustained study of professional ethics and technical issues may be accomplished 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, we also identify strongly with other members of the profession. Peer review, 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 our areas of practice, hold paramount the health, safety and welfare of the public, and have regard for the environment.<sup>5</sup> We are accountable for our own professional practice, for the professional practice of those under our supervision, and for our profession generally as part of our 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 the highest esteem. APEGGA's *Guideline for Ethical Practice* provides an interpretation and amplification of the Code of Ethics, complete with illustrative case studies.

For effective pursuit of our work, professional members depend upon our credibility to the client or employer in our technical competence and the confidence of the public at large in our character and integrity to serve society. This imposes a duty upon the profession and upon individuals to justify the trust that we enjoy from the public, clients, or employers in both our technical ability and our 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 as "excellent".

Finally, the professional's duty to public service 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). We 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.

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5 *Code of Ethics*. APEGGA, 2003.

### 3 CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE PROFESSIONAL

Given the components of professionalism discussed previously, there are many issues that must be considered. Through our daily actions, we directly affect the public's trust in the professions, a misperception of the professions as being elitist or a monopoly, the ability to handle increasing public expectations, increasing specialization and complexity, and multiple constituents or stakeholders. If we are aware of and consciously consider these issues, then we are better equipped to address them.

#### 3.1 PUBLIC TRUST

The public has opinions on the trustworthiness of professions and institutions, which determines how they interact with and rely upon them. Recently, there have been numerous reports of misleading financial statements, conflicts of interest, and insider trading in Canada and the U.S. These incidences are causing a growing public mistrust in corporations and the professions.

We need to recognize that the public, in spite of all the critical press, places higher trust in engineers than in many other professions. A Canadian poll shows that the public trusts:<sup>6</sup>

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

Professional Engineers, Geologists, and Geophysicists must recognize that trust is carefully conferred and must be protected. And trust is fragile and easily lost. Our ability to serve the public and clients is wholly dependant upon their trust in our professional judgment and our ethics.

#### 3.2 MISPERCEPTION OF PROFESSIONS AS ELITIST

Professionals and the professions are sometimes misperceived as being 'elitist'. Professionalism and elitism do share similar concepts, such as high standards. However, elitism has also taken on the meanings of arrogance and self-satisfaction - which are completely at odds with the concept of professionalism.

As professionals, we are reminded of our responsibility to explain and educate, and to use self-discipline in exercising the power that comes with knowledge and advanced training. While being members of a select group, we must continually and carefully show that we serve a cause for the public and not for ourselves.

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6 Ipsos Reid commissioned by Ontario Society of Professional Engineers, November 2001 [Online]. Available URL: [http://www.canadianconsultingengineer.com/common\\_scripts/dailynews/print\\_version.asp?id=6290](http://www.canadianconsultingengineer.com/common_scripts/dailynews/print_version.asp?id=6290). Unfortunately, this survey did not consider geologists and geophysicists.



### **3.3 MISPERCEPTION OF PROFESSIONS AS A MONOPOLY**

The professions are sometimes misperceived as being 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 clients want geological work done, they must get it from a P.Geol.).

The aim of a professional association is to protect public welfare by ensuring only properly qualified members are allowed to practice engineering, geology and geophysics. APEGGA registers professionals to ensure internal discipline, high standards of practice, and adherence to the Code of Ethics – not to influence markets.

The continual challenge for professional associations is to balance professional standards and the protection of the public with accessibility of licensure to all qualified persons. Many jurisdictions have implemented initiatives to increase the accessibility of licensure to those from non-traditional or non-accredited educational programs. These initiatives include, but are not limited to, starting the licensing process prior to immigration, facilitating the attainment of Canadian experience through co-operative placements or provisional licensure, and creating categories of licensure with limited scopes of practice.

### **3.4 PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS**

Public expectations of professionals have greatly increased. Many clients 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. As a result, the gap between the public’s expectations of professional services and the actual deliverables may be growing.

Therefore, it is imperative that professionals manage expectations. We must adequately inform clients of our professional responsibilities and of the legal, ethical, and practical limitations of the service provided. 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 issue for professionals is the increasing of human efficiency through the specialization of tasks. With the increasing complexity of large jobs, the work is broken into smaller segments and divided among employees, instead of a single person carrying out every segment of the project.

Responsible members must ensure that the management, organization, and apportioning of responsibilities amongst professional members is supportive of professional practice and development. Further, as professionals we must continuously develop our ‘soft’ skills - such as communication, team work, and supportive supervision. This ensures that we are more able to positively influence the functioning of our organizations.

### 3.6 ACCOUNTABLE TO MULTIPLE CONSTITUENTS

Professionals are accountable to many different constituents or stakeholders. There are many levels of accountability and methods to control it, such as to:

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

Further, as professionals, our actions are influenced and controlled by insurers through our insurance policies and the premiums charged - even though there may be no direct accountability to insurers per se.

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

Whether we are employers, supervisors, clients, or employees in this equation, we are reminded that there may be competing or contradictory demands to be considered. The *Guideline for Ethical Practice* may be consulted when considering the various constituents and their demands.

## 4 ENCOURAGING PROFESSIONALISM

The issues discussed in the previous section may be addressed by us individually and in groups. Individually, we can encourage professionalism through mentoring and daily demonstration of professional behaviour. In groups, we can encourage professionalism through our involvement in technical or professional societies and corporately 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/

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Geologist/Geophysicist? Have I demonstrated expertise and commitment to the growth and development of the profession?" It is through the practice of such self-awareness as individuals that we personalize professionalism and contribute to the overall professionalism of our group.

#### **4.2 INVOLVEMENT IN PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL SOCIETIES**

Active involvement in professional and technical societies reinforces several aspects of professionalism. Involvement may contribute to the technical body of knowledge and maintenance of competence. Such societies may also increase awareness of and compliance with professional and ethical standards. Ongoing networking and mentoring further reinforces the professionalism of the group. Finally, involvement raises professional status amongst peers and with the public at large.

#### **4.3 PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY**

Professional behaviour by organizations, corporations, and industry encourages the investment of public trust. Further, employers who encourage professional employees to maintain a high level of professionalism 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 usually has a high level of individuality. Professionals, despite having a technical background, cannot be considered only as a thinking machine but as individuals who have 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 individuals of stature among colleagues. It is the responsibility of the employer to show recognition of professionalism in employees and support careers which will give adequate challenge.

Realistic workplace policies - including fair performance appraisals, financial and intrinsic compensation for job contributions – support professionalism among employees. 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.<sup>7</sup>

A supportive climate may be seriously compromised if 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.<sup>8</sup>

Professional Engineers, Geologists, and Geophysicists may be required to join a union, as a condition of employment. In the case of strike or lockout, as professionals, our duty

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

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

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to our employer takes precedence over any duty to the union. The *Guideline for Ethical Practice* states that we should act as faithful agents of our employers - faithfully discharging our responsibilities to clients/employers, always acting with fairness and justice to all.<sup>9</sup>

The professional's primary responsibility is to protect the welfare of the public, whether or not 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 professional judgement on technical or ethical issues.<sup>10</sup>

This may bring professionals face-to-face with company loyalty versus professional responsibility. The stakes rise when we take a professional stance and our career may be negatively affected by our decision. In this situation we must ask ourselves: "Am I right? Is it important to stand firm?" As professionals, we must ensure that appropriate action or notification of proper authorities occurs in any instance where we 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.<sup>11</sup> Professionals share corporate responsibility for the quality of products and services delivered. Under 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.<sup>12</sup>

These questions which 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 PROFESSIONAL ENGINEER, GEOLOGIST, OR GEOPHYSICIST TO PROFESSIONAL MANAGER**

The path in career progression may lead from a technical role 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.

With career progression, professionals may face a decision whether to continue pursuing a technical career or turn to management – of either a technical or non-

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

10 *Ibid.* 9.

11 Perlow, L. and Williams, S. "Is Silence Killing Your Company?" *Harvard Business Review*, May 2003, p. 52-58.

12 *Plain Language Guide: Bill C-45 - Amendments to the Criminal Code Affecting the Criminal Liability of Organizations* [Justice Canada; Last updated Feb. 3, 2004]. Available URL: <http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/dept/pub/c45/>. The amended Act came into force on March 31, 2004.

technical group. The skills and knowledge of a manager are different from those of a Professional Engineer, Geologist or Geophysicist. Although professionals are committed to their field of technical expertise and knowledge, as a manager 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. When moving into management, maintaining high standards of professionalism becomes even more imperative to influence the professionalism of the organization as a whole.

## **5 SUMMARY**

The rights and privileges granted to Professional Engineers, Geologists, and Geophysicists such as self-regulation, technical independence, and public trust depends upon the maintenance of professionalism. As professional members, it is our responsibility to uphold the highest standards of professional and ethical behaviour for service to the public, for ourselves, for our peers, and for our profession as a whole. Let us make professionalism our own personal agenda.