The registration issue

At its meeting on February 19-20, 1977, the IEEE Board of Directors approved a policy statement on the registration of engineers. Its principal provision:

Recommends that all practitioners responsible for their activities or the activities of their subordinates, be licensed to practice. Signature to any work performed, or to show approval/acceptance of a subprofessional's activities, is one example to indicate responsibility.

In addition, the statement recommends that the present industrial exemption "as it applies to practitioners responsible for their activities" be dropped and that "state laws uniformly reserve the title of engineer... to licensed practitioners..."

The Technical Activities Board (TAB), the assembly of technical groups and societies within IEEE, was not consulted until the policy was fait accompli—but after the opportunity to consider the issue seriously, TAB has voiced overwhelming opposition.

The policy is prefaced by recognition of "the need to safeguard the quality of the practice of engineering in order to protect the health, safety, and welfare of the public" and "to protect the professional reputation of competent and responsible practitioners against the injury to that reputation occasioned by unprofessional practice."

Who can quarrel with these reasons? Indeed, opposition to registration appears to be opposition to virtue and status. But will registration accomplish these objectives?

Like any good bureaucracy faced with such a dilemma, we appointed a study committee. This group favored virtue and status, not registration.

The committee, ably chaired by Dr. Martha Sloan, raised many serious questions and proposed an alternate policy. One of their concerns was that current registration examination has little relevance either to the careers of most engineers or to the products they produce. Because of the impracticality of developing the host of in-depth examinations required, registration exams will never be very relevant. If we must test, measure, qualify, and requalify—and if these exercises are not meaningful—the public is not protected and the registered engineers club is not so exclusive.

The new IEEE registration policy could serve to narrow the engineering field, counter to today's highly interdisciplinary requirements. In fact, engineers could be bypassed, defined out of such pervasive technologies as LSI and computers. Our preference is to see engineering broadened to include the many other disciplines integral to designing today's electronic components and systems.

Other concerns, some 16 to 18 in all, ranged from slowed technological progress to political/bureaucratic state control. These may warrant attention at another time. Perhaps more significantly, if legislative action can help, we believe there are better ways to protect the public than through the registration of engineers. Among them could be laws to protect engineers—and others—who speak out in the public interest.

This is a complex issue. As more of these ramifications come to light, including the impracticalities of implementation, the limited objectives attainable, and the additional problems created, the IEEE Board may well decide to alter its policy. Meanwhile, the Computer Society's Governing Board has taken a strong position against registration. Ultimately, the membership may have to decide. We will be prepared to present you with the pros and cons.

Merlin Smith
President