

Flex Your Professional Muscle

Licensure maximizes your opportunities during uncertain times

Bill Koenig

The advantages of being a licensed engineer are more evident daily. Our economy has been in a slump and the short-term outlook is shaky. Companies are restructuring, downsizing, outsourcing, privatizing and even closing. Engineers must adapt. Being licensed provides the maximum level of professional flexibility during uncertain economic times.

Federal, state and local governments also are imposing more regulations that require the services of a licensed engineer. Only a licensed engineer may prepare, sign and seal, and submit engineering plans and drawings to a public authority for approval, or seal engineering work for public and private clients.

Even though licensure provides maximum professional opportunities, people have been deterred or discouraged from pursuing this process. As past chair of the Professional Engineering Institute (PEI), I received many of their questions and comments, which I would like to address here.

Why do I need to be licensed if I already have an engineering degree?

I have had a person tell me that being licensed can make engineers overqualified. Actually, by being licensed you are stating that you are qualified and competent. The National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE) addressed a similar question with the following answer:

"It has generally been recognized that a degree in and of itself may not be sufficient to demonstrate the desired level of professional competency. There are fundamental differences between success in a formal education program and the ability to practice a profession involving the public health, safety and welfare. This distinction has been recognized and accepted by the other professions, such as law and medicine, which also require examinations for a state license to practice."

I do not need to be licensed for my job.

Licensure is a way for engineers to demonstrate a commitment to engineering professionalism. It can be a deciding factor when employers are evaluating employees for promotion and more responsible work, which often translate into increased salary and benefits. Engineering Times (July 2002) reported the median income for a full-time salaried engineer with a PE to be more than 30 percent higher than a nonlicensed counterpart (\$84,000 vs. \$64,200).

Being licensed will increase liability for my employer and me.

Most employers understand the benefits of having licensed engineers on their staff, because employers can demonstrate to their customers and clients the quality of their products and services. Employers can market the credibility of the company to gain larger and higher profile projects. Being licensed by itself does not increase liability. Businesses or people are held liable by their actions. Unfortunately, some companies discourage their

engineers from becoming licensed stating liability concerns. These companies do not understand the benefits of having licensed engineers on their staff or fear losing good employees. Employers who discourage employees from becoming licensed not only hurt their employees, but they hurt their company. Licensed engineers not only show commitment and loyalty to their profession, but also to their employer.

The PE Exam does not test in my specific area of expertise.

NSPE states, "A licensure examination tests more than technical knowledge. . It also involves an understanding of ethics, professional concepts, and the application of principles to practice . an examination prescribes the same standard for all, regardless of educational background, extent of schooling and experience."

The Agricultural PE Exam focuses on all expertise areas including biological systems, food, structures, machine design, water and manure management, etc. Even though many different areas are tested, many concepts overlap expertise areas such as heat transfer, fluid flow, psychrometrics, mass and energy balances, etc. From my discussions with licensed agricultural engineers from all expertise areas, the consensus is that competent engineers should be able to successfully complete licensure requirements no matter their expertise.

Additional licensure questions and answers can be found on the NSPE and NCEES Websites at www.nspe.org and www.ncees.org.

Finally, do you view your engineering position as a profession in which you look for continual self-improvement or do you view your engineering position simply as a job in which you put in your time? If you view it as a profession, becoming licensed is a logical step to self-improvement and professional commitment. The best time to start the licensure process is while in college, but it is never too late. PEI and ASABE can help you prepare. Do not delay. Get started on improving your future now.

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