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ICE reinvents its learned society role

The Institution of Civil Engineers has completely restructured its learned society activities to strengthen its position as the leading source of expert civil engineering knowledge, for practitioners, industry and society. Vice president **Scott Steedman** explains.

In November 2007, for the first time in the history of the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE), its governing council approved an activity plan for learned society activity.

It was a milestone in ICE's recent history, representing the output of several years' work to evolve the historic engineering-board structure into a more dynamic, flexible, output-driven format built around the concept of 'expert' panels linked through electronic networks. For the first time, the work of the learned society can be presented as a series of coherent activities, all linked to the overall ICE strategy and plan.

The object of the new structure has been to put 'knowledge' at the heart of the Institution's activities, where it can be deployed to benefit members, industry and society at large. By focusing on the delivery of the right knowledge to the right audience at the right time, ICE will be able to increase its impact with the profession, build its reputation with the public and fulfil its charitable objective.

Five knowledge themes

The first step was to analyse what the learned society did and to develop a knowledge strategy. It was realised that all of ICE's knowledge outputs fell into one of five different 'themes'.

- External knowledge—knowledge aimed at government, media and the public.
- Best practice—knowledge aimed at the profession.
- Research and innovation—emerging knowledge.
- Building capacity—stimulating take-up of knowledge at all career stages.
- Events—knowledge gained from participating in events.

Last year ICE invited five senior figures to chair five new 'knowledge panels', with the express purpose of directing knowledge outputs under each of these five knowledge themes. Their responsibility is quality and delivery, and they take their inputs from ICE council 'top down' and from the technical groups that form the body of the learned society, 'bottom up'.

New expert panels

The first technical groups to emerge have evolved out of the old engineering boards, and they are known as 'expert panels'. This was a deliberate decision, made by the boards themselves, to reinforce the message that ICE's learned society was about excellence, and technical groups who sought to publish papers, organise meetings, prepare policy or run training events must be striving always to involve leading figures in the profession.

Each year, each expert panel must submit its activity plan first to the knowledge panels and then for approval by the learned society committee. The panels need to demonstrate high-quality knowledge outputs, developed and delivered by the best people, whether or not they are members of ICE.

ICE's various associated societies will thus have a vital opportunity in the new learned society, as do ICE regions, which will benefit from the greater coordination and more effective direction of knowledge outputs. We have only one learned society and we are all part of it.

Flexibility and response

Introducing the concept of expert panels has had another important advantage. By breaking down the traditional 'silo' model based on engineering disciplines, it has been possible to introduce more flexible and dynamic groupings, formed for a specific purpose and then disbanded. These expert panels are called 'lifed' panels, and greater use of such groups to deliver short- or medium-term, project-style deliverables is anticipated.

ICE's new learned society structure is designed to strengthen its position as the leading source of expert civil engineering knowledge

For example, an expert panel on climate change and energy was formed recently with the specific objective of drafting ICE policy in this vital area. A lifed panel was also used to pull together expert support for ICE's response to the recent Innovation, Universities and Skills committee's consultation on engineering and the role of engineers in the UK. Every future *State of the Nation* report will be prepared by a lifed expert panel, and so on.

This year, for the first time, we will be able to set out all the products of our learned society and compare them with our plan. Looking forward, we have a structure that can respond to external ideas and can work faster and more effectively to meet the expectations of the growing numbers of people who are interested in what ICE has to offer. Our vision is that within a few years, the new learned society will become, once again, the vibrant heart of the Institution's activity.

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