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The Role of a Professional Society in Promoting the Success in the Maritime Industry

Trevor Blakeley^{a,*}

^aChief Executive, Royal Institution of Naval Architects

Abstract

The historic role of engineering professional societies such as the Royal Institution of Naval Architects has been to promote and facilitate the exchange of technical and scientific information and discussion, and through this to influence and contribute towards furthering the knowledge and standards within their particular discipline of engineering. Professional societies today have a wider and more proactive part to play in helping to provide the engineers with the knowledge, understanding and professional skills who are essential to the future success of the maritime industry. This paper examines the pivotal role a modern professional society plays in the education, professional development and employment of engineers.

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1. Introduction

I am sure that I do not need to tell you that all sectors of the maritime industry are today facing challenges, the like and scale of which many in the industry will not have experienced before. They are obvious to all in the industry.

It is therefore not surprising that as I visit universities and meet with students, I find that they too are aware of the present state of the industry which they hope to join. It is therefore also not surprising that they ask me about their career prospects.

Had I been asked that question prior to 2008, only eight years ago, I would have told them that the global maritime industry was enjoying a level of prosperity it had not known for many years, with the order books of many shipyards and shipping rates at record levels for recent times. Their career prospects were correspondingly very good.

Today, following the global financial crisis in 2008, I would tell them that the maritime industry still offers a good career, but that the industry was indeed facing many challenges in responding to the downturn in activity which it and many other industries are experiencing. However, I would also tell them that many sectors of the industry are facing up to those challenges well as they seek to respond to the current situation, and anticipate the return to the success they have previously enjoyed. But, I would warn them that the maritime industry will continue to face those challenges for the foreseeable future, and that they will have an important part to play in ensuring that the maritime industry continues its progress. Professional societies too have an important part to play.

A key factor in both achieving and maintaining that progress to success which the industry is seeking as it responds to the challenges it faces is innovative thinking in all sectors. By innovation, I mean "to bring in new ideas, to

* Corresponding author. Tel.:
E-mail address:

introduce new methods, to make changes, to invent, and to discover” Such innovation has and will continue to require commitment and investment, but perhaps most importantly, it will require people with the knowledge, understanding and professional skills needed by the maritime industry both today and in the future.

The maritime industry is highly dependent on technology, and it is therefore in technological and scientific development that innovation has had and will continue to have the greatest impact in providing marine vessels and structures which cost less to design, build and operate, are safer, and are more sensitive to the environment. Conferences such as MARTEC 2016 will present such technical developments. However, I believe that professional societies have a key role to play in helping to ensure that engineers in the maritime industry have that knowledge, understanding and those professional skills. A professional society should fulfil this role and responsibility principally by setting standards of professional competence and both encouraging and assisting engineers to achieve and maintain those standards.

In referring to the maritime industry, I include those who educate, train, and carry out research, as well as those who design, produce, maintain and regulate. Co-operation between all those sectors is another key factor in ensuring the success of the maritime industry, and professional societies have an important role to play in helping to achieve that co-operation.

But in order to examine how professional societies can promote success in the maritime industry, I would like to take a wider look at the role and responsibilities of a modern professional society. When the Royal Institution of Naval Architects was formed in 1860, its objectives were to promote the art and science of naval architecture. As with other engineering professional societies set up at that time, its main function was to enable and encourage the exchange of information relating to ship design and construction. Access to information is of course essential to the professional development of any engineer. This was achieved mainly through the publication and discussion of technical and scientific papers. In this way, the professional society was able to influence and contribute towards furthering the knowledge and standards of engineering. Professional societies at that time also gave advice on the education and training of engineers, which of course is crucial to achieving and maintaining high professional standards. Whilst those fundamental aims, which I am sure are shared by other professional societies, remain equally valid today, I believe that professional societies today must play a much more proactive role in the education, training and professional development of engineers in the maritime industry, and in doing so, help to promote the success of the maritime industry.

2. What is a Profession?

Even if you are not members of a professional society, if you are an engineer, I am sure you would call yourself a professional engineer. But what is a professional engineer? What is a profession? In examining the role of a modern professional society, we should start by first answering that question, whether applied to engineering, medicine, law etc. To quote the Concise Oxford Dictionary, a profession is a vocation or calling, esp. one which involves some branch of advanced learning or science, or it is a body of persons engaged in a profession.

2.1. Governing Body

Key amongst those factors which distinguish a profession and therefore a member of that profession is the requirement for it to have a governing body and for it to be regulated, either voluntarily or by law. This governing body should set standards of professional competence as a condition of entry to the profession and therefore the achievement of professional status. The governing body should also actively encourage and assist the members of that profession to achieve and maintain those standards. In addition to setting standards of professional competence, the governing body should also set and enforce standards of ethical and professional conduct to be observed by members of that profession. I believe that it is a function of a modern professional society to be such a governing body for its members. I also believe that to be considered as a member of a profession such as engineering, and to describe oneself as a professional engineer, an individual must accept those conditions and criteria which define a profession, including the authority of a governing body such as a professional society. This would not be questioned for a member of the medical or legal professions. Logically, therefore, to be counted as a professional engineer, an individual should be a member of an engineering professional society and accept its authority.

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