

The new broom

As the Society of Operations Engineers – home to BES, IPlantE and IRTE – welcomes its new chief executive, Brian Tinha finds out more about the man and his ambitions for SOE

There's a new broom at the SOE (Society of Operations Engineers) – the umbrella organisation for BES (Bureau of Engineer Surveyors), IPlantE (Institution of Plant Engineers) and IRTE (Institute of Road Transport Engineers). Peter Walsh CEng CEnv FSOE FIEAust (45) is the professional engineering institution's new chief executive and, with a directness and dynamism characteristic of his Australian origins, it looks like the membership can expect positive developments – and soon.

Walsh comes with a solid engineering background and sporting a CV that demonstrates he is nothing if not industrious. With his early ambition to be an air force pilot thwarted, he changed tack to read mathematics and computer science at the University of Queensland. During his academic studies, however, he decided that wrapping both subjects in engineering would stand him in better stead for the future, so he extended his degree to include electrical engineering, attaining the two degrees in 1990.

Engineering in the blood

Not satisfied with coursework alone, though, Walsh also worked part-time for the university's facilities management group. Then, on graduating, he stepped into a full-time role as an electrical engineer with the university. "I worked on projects such as installing and upgrading building energy management systems, before being appointed maintenance manager when I was 23, with a staff of 60," he recalls. "They were exciting times and soon after that I was promoted to assistant director of operations."

In that role, Walsh found himself working on the development and implementation of an environmental management plan for the university, which ultimately he saw through to ISO 14001 accreditation. That was a big deal, he agrees, and it clearly fostered his passion for environmental engineering – and politics. Because, having completed that assignment, he found himself project managing the construction of the university's athletics facilities, ready for the 2000 Olympics. "That entailed a lot of stakeholder management," he smiles. "It was about liaising with many community groups, with different interests, while working to deliver the project on-budget."

A full-time commitment? Not for Walsh. While at

the university, he also went for his CEng. But discovering he needed more design experience, he took on the design, procurement, installation and commissioning of an electricity substation for the university. "We could have given the task to some consultants, but I decided to do it myself. It was an awesome project and I'm glad I did, because it made me a much better engineer," he comments. And also a better manager: not only was he duly awarded Chartered Engineer status, but, shortly afterwards, he also completed an MBA.

Clearly, this is not a man afraid of getting stuck in. So when, in 1998, he decided to move from public service into the commercial world, joining Haden Engineering (soon to be taken over by Tyco) as operations manager, it wasn't long before he found himself running all of Haden throughout Queensland.

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What next? "Law is part of every manager's life, so I decided to do a law degree."

Walsh grins: plainly, he enjoyed the experience. So much so that, when he completed his graduate diploma of legal practice at Queensland University of Technology, aged 34, he went on to join a private practice, focusing on construction and commercial law. Having been admitted as a solicitor at the Supreme Court of Queensland, however, he soon returned to engineering, becoming commercial manager for a joint venture specialising in coal ash handling plant for power stations. "It was a great role. I also worked as operations manager and project manager on site for months at a time," he recalls.

But in 2008, he needed another challenge, so Walsh flew to the UK. And, having worked as commercial and senior project manager with GBM Minerals Engineering Consultants, designing and building heavy plant for gold and silver mines, he now takes up the post of chief exec at the SOE.

Why? "I see myself as a plant engineer and an operations engineer, with extensive experience in facilities management, so the IPlantE and SOE was a natural home for me. But the truth is, after I joined as a fellow in 2010, I found myself thinking this society could be doing better for its members."

What does he mean? Walsh is candid: "I expect my institution to give me a level of professional prestige, opportunities for CPD [continuing professional development] and routes to enhancing my career. SOE can do much more of that. So, since I'm passionate about engineer development, I decided to go for the top job and focus on setting SOE apart from the rest."

Where does he intend to start? "Since I came to the UK, I've been heavily involved in Engineers Australia's UK Chapter – active in organising CPD events with them and running their 'getting chartered' seminars. I've also just completed my Diploma of Project Management online through Engineers Australia," he explains. "I want to kick off by getting SOE offering more of that kind of support."

Walsh is emphatic: "I'm very keen on our institution helping technicians, engineers and engineering managers to maximise their potential. That's what we're here to do – and one thing SOE has in spades over any other UK professional engineering institution is the opportunity to develop members through EngTech to IEng. That's because of the markets our members operate in, which means we have access to the numbers – and the vast majority are eligible for registration."

The dream team

And that applies across all the professional sectors that make up SOE, he insists – BES, IPlantE and IRTE. "I'm a plant man, but I very much welcome the arrival of Sir Moir Lockhead [former chief executive of First Group and a staunch IRTE man] as incoming patron, and Gerry Fleming as new president. Between us, that makes for an excellent balance and, together, I expect us to make a real difference."

But for Walsh, making this happen is about improving services – offering value for money that commands respect. "To be worthy of people's investment in SOE membership, we need to step up our game, with up-to-date online joining and registration procedures, more CPD, including online material, such as seminar videos etc. We also need to offer more opportunities for networking and member engagement, particularly at the local level."

Branding and status are also part of Walsh's credo. "I'm very supportive of the SOE trustee board's decision to apply for a Royal Charter. That is a project in process: we're hoping to lodge the petition in the next few weeks. This will be a catalyst

not only for rebranding SOE, but also repositioning ourselves within professional engineering."

So what does Walsh say to prospective members? "Come and join SOE, because we will give you the recognition you deserve as a professional engineer in a highly competitive world. Being registered with the Engineering Council through SOE sets you apart. It proves your competence and standing. And we will provide the opportunities for you to continually develop that competence, both online and with the help of like-minded people."

"I look forward to engaging with as many of you as possible at upcoming regional and national training seminars and meetings. But, above all, rest assured that your SOE will be moving forward – adopting the best ideas from around the globe for our members. We will also be looking to partner with academic and industry partners, aligning, for example, our accreditation with their aspirations for development."

"We are already pursuing joint seminar opportunities with other professional institutions, including Engineers Australia and IPENZ [Institution of Professional Engineers New Zealand]. I now look forward to working with colleagues closer to home."

It's a long list. But, with Walsh's track record, you can bet this new broom will make things happen. And soon. **TE**



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