

Practice Review – The Professional Coach

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SUMMARY

When we think of the concept of maintaining professional competence, continuing education immediately comes to mind. A more effective approach to continuing professional development in the broader context however is a system of practice review.

Practice review can take many forms. In the Alberta model practice review consists of a comprehensive review of the practice of professional surveyors and the firms in which they practice on a five-year rotational basis. The review includes an office visit where files, field records, communications, field and office systems and other components of the professional practice are reviewed together with a plan, field note and field survey check.

Specific findings are confidential between the practitioner and the staff of the Systematic Practice Review Department. A face to face discussion of the results of the review between the practitioner and the Director of Practice Review is conducted in an effort to coach the practitioner in how to provide more effective service. The results of the program are reviewed on an annual basis and compiled statistical information is made available to the membership.

This paper will discuss the principles and procedures of the Systematic Practice Review program that is in place for the Alberta Land Surveyors' Association in Alberta, Canada.

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1. BACKGROUND

The Alberta Land Surveyors' Association is the professional organization charged with the responsibility of regulating the surveying profession pursuant to the Land Surveyors Act in the Province of Alberta, Canada. The population of Alberta is just over 3 million and the number of registered land surveyors is about 300. The Alberta Land Surveyors' Association was formed in 1910 and has several comprehensive programs in place to fulfill its mandate of managing the surveying profession in an efficient and effective manner.

The Alberta Land Surveyors' Association first established a system of practice review in 1987 and has modified the process on several occasions. The current program is called Systematic Practice Review.

2. PRACTICE REVIEW - WHAT IS IT?

The primary mandate of any professional association is to ensure that practitioners acquire at least a minimum level of competency before being allowed to practice and more importantly that all members retain that minimum level of competence throughout their careers. The primary responsibility of a professional organization is to ensure that the public is protected against incompetent practice.

The mandate for practice review is contained in the Land Surveyors Act which states in section 13(1)(a):

13(1) The Board shall at the request of the Council or after consultation with the Council

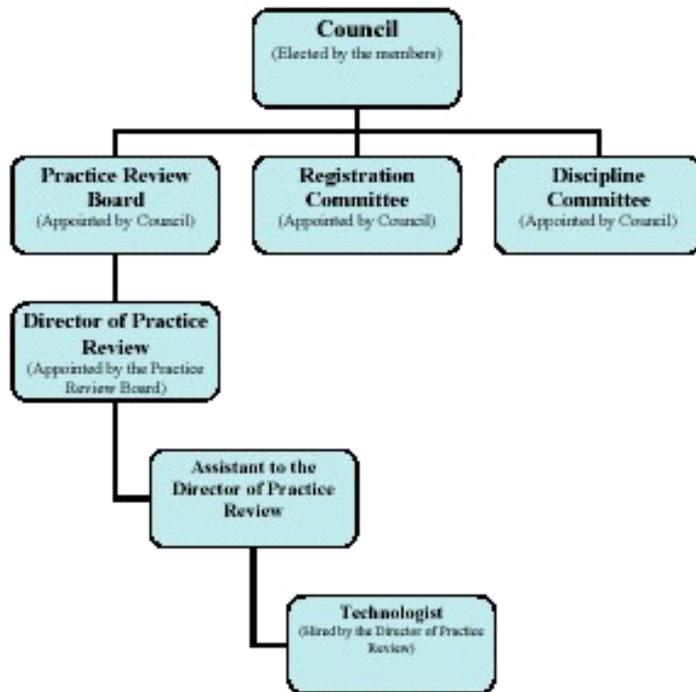
- inquire into and report to and advise the Council in respect of
 - the assessment of existing and the development of new educational standards and experience requirements that are conditions precedent to obtaining and continuing registration under this Act,
 - the evaluation of desirable standards of competence of practitioners generally,
 - the practice of surveying by practitioners generally, and
 - any other matter that the Council from time to time considers necessary or appropriate in connection with the exercise of its powers and the performance of its duties in relation to competence in the practice of surveying under this Act and the regulations, and
- conduct a review of the practice of a practitioner in accordance with this Act and the regulations.

In accordance with the direction of the governing statute the Systematic Practice Review program is established as a peer review program aimed at ensuring that the public can rely on practitioners to offer an acceptable level of expertise primarily in the practice of cadastral surveying. In point of fact the Council feels that an acceptable level of expertise is the minimum acceptable standard and philosophically the program should encourage a standard of excellence.

The overriding philosophy of practice review in Alberta has always been to act as a coach as opposed to a policeman. In this regard the program is of an educational nature despite the fact that the legislation does give the Practice Review Board certain disciplinary powers. The Board has always taken the position that it will not wear its disciplinary hat but rather refer potentially punitive decisions to the Discipline Committee for resolution when warranted. This tradition has helped to establish the acceptance and credibility of the Practice Review Board in the eyes of practitioners.

3. ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

The Systematic Practice Review department is established as a work team composed of two professional surveyors, a technical assistant and a half time administrative assistant. The Director of Practice Review who is a professional surveyor, manages the program. The overall program is specifically designed to systematically review in depth a number of products of each practitioner in a five year period as well as conduct an office visit and interview with the practitioner. The Director with his broad experience in overseeing the practice of 300 practitioners is in a good position to coach members (both novice and veteran) in how they might raise their standards of practice, or possibly to offer some friendly advice on areas of concern where they may be falling behind the norm of current practice. If situations arise where a practitioner is uncooperative with the Director, a report is made to the Practice Review Board who may according to the governing statute make a complaint in writing to the Discipline Committee and the failure or refusal to cooperate may be held by the Discipline Committee to be unprofessional conduct. If a practitioner disagrees with the Director on any matter in the final report, the Practice Review Board will decide on a course of action. A practitioner may voluntarily attend the meeting where the report is considered by the Practice Review Board to put forward their position on the issue. The Practice Review Board may also elect to hold a formal hearing with the member to review the matter and decide on a course of action.



The Director of Practice Review reports to the Practice Review Board which is composed of eight land surveyors and a public member appointed by the Government of Alberta. The Practice Review Board in turn reports to the Council of the Association which sets the policy direction for the Board within the mandate prescribed by the statute.

The program has been funded since formation by a special levy on survey monuments. Prior to 1987, the Alberta government manufactured and distributed all survey monuments. They also had a program of pre-examination of all cadastral survey plans prior to registration in the Land Titles system. As part of government downsizing both of these operations were taken over by the Alberta Land Surveyors' Association with an agreement that the Association could place a surcharge on the sale of survey monuments sufficient to fund the practice review program. This has worked quite successfully with post sales consistently producing a sufficient surplus to fund practice review. The annual costs are approximately \$300,000 Canadian, which equates to just under 200,000 Euros.

4. THE REVIEW PROCESS

A review consists of an internal audit and an external audit.

The internal audit is composed of a face to face review by the Director of Practice Review with the practitioner in that practitioners office. The internal review may consist of a review of staff experience and education, types and volume of work, field and office equipment available, quality control processes, supervision, safety programs, advertising and promotion programs, office systems and field procedures employed in the practice, filing and archival systems and an on site review of a number of files selected at random. Files are also selected

for a subsequent external audit. A review of corrective actions as a result of previous reviews may also be included in the internal audit.

The external audit includes a random review of a selection of plans registered by the practitioner in the Land Titles Office, a review of field notes and a field inspection. Standardized checklists are used in the examination of plans, field notes and field inspections. This portion of the review is normally conducted by the field surveyor and assistant.

Upon completion of the auditing process a report of findings with recommendations is compiled and submitted to the practitioner with a request for a response. The report with the practitioners response together with an overall general analysis is submitted to the Practice Review Board for their information and deliberation. The anonymity of the practitioner is maintained in all reports submitted to the Practice Review Board. If so desired the practitioner may appear before the Board to answer questions or provide further comment on the report. The Board may also request that the practitioner appear before it, if it feels that further clarification is required.

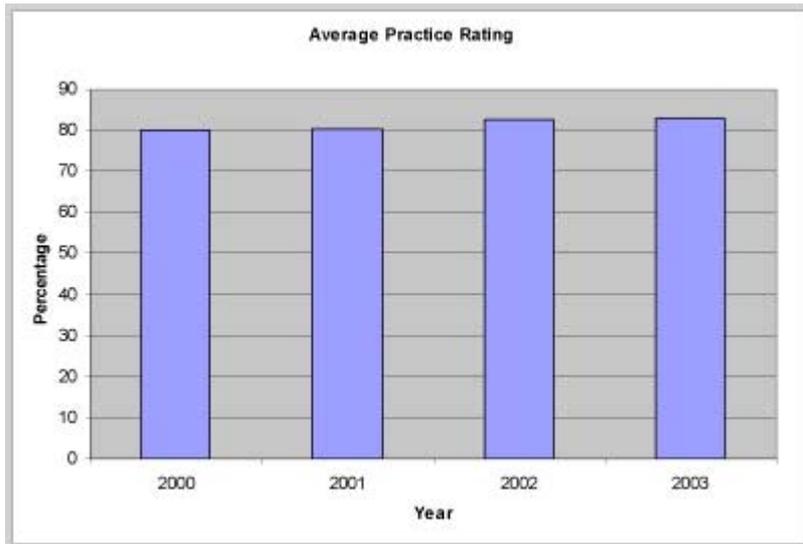
5. OBSERVATIONS AND OUTCOMES

The average practice rating has risen by one half to a full percentage point each year since the current matrix of statistics was established in the year 1999. An analysis of four years of statistics indicates that generally speaking plans are good to very good with an overall average practice rating for all practitioners of over 83%.

Statistics are maintained which compare the practice review ratings from year to year based on several different types of surveys, and are broken down into categories of plan conformity, field notes and field inspection. Areas which are noticeably out of sync with good practice are highlighted and further analysis and general remedial actions may be proposed.

As an example, the category of survey identified as RPR's has consistently rated low in the annual statistical analysis. The Real Property Report is a type of survey that is very important to consumers and is perhaps the most common survey that is performed directly for the general public. The analysis has pointed to a number of concerns regarding the acceptance of governing evidence particularly in urban areas. As a result of this analysis a mini-conference/seminar is being designed to address issues specifically relevant to Real Property Reports with the intention that discussion may lead to an improvement in practice in this area.

With regard to field notes and field inspections it is clear that a minority of practitioners have major problems with poor field notes for subdivisions and a few practitioners are having significant field problems. Overall however the field note and field inspection averages are in the 60% to 90% range.



On more specific examination the Director of Practice Review has determined that there are some problems with evidence assessment which is leading to boundary uncertainties in a number of instances. This is a critical issue which is being addressed by the Director of Practice Review and the Practice Review Board. It has also been identified as a subject for more intensive discussion and instruction in association seminars.

One seminar that the Alberta Land Surveyors' Association offers at four month intervals is a seminar called Getting it Right. Both the Director of Practice Review and his assistant are heavily involved in instructing at this seminar. The two day seminar is a very practical case study style workshop that deals with specific problems, many of which evolve from practice reviews. These seminars are well attended by both professional and technical staff and go a long ways towards improving the quality of practice.

The Director of Practice Review is also active in providing regular reports of a general nature to the membership through the association's quarterly newsletter - ALS News. A report on general observations on practice concerns together with a case study is published in each issue.

6. CONCLUSION

A system of practice review has been in place in the Alberta Land Surveyors' Association for nearly 20 years. The post registration audit has required practitioners to be totally responsible for their professional activities rather than relying on a government office to check their plans prior to registration. This shift in procedure has led to practitioners accepting full responsibility for the quality of their work rather than relying on an external governmental review. By and large the profession has accepted the challenge and practices have steadily improved. There is always room for improvement but the systematic practice review will hopefully keep abreast of the practice of surveying in general as well as the competence of individual practitioners and will curb any serious problems. The additional advantage of this process has been to speed up the plan registration process and give the surveyor more control of project timelines.

REFERENCES

Government of Alberta, (2000), Land Surveyors Act, RSA2000, c. L-3

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Ken Allred is a past president of the Alberta Land Surveyors' Association in the province of Alberta, Canada. He is a past chair (1994-98) of Commission 1 of FIG, was a member of FIG Task Forces on Constituting Professional Associations, Cultures and Languages in FIG, Mutual Recognition of Qualifications, and Exchange of Surveying Personnel. He has also served as President of the Canadian Council of Land Surveyors and was Executive Director of the Alberta Land Surveyors' Association for 14 years.

Lyall Pratt is also a past president of the Alberta Land Surveyors' Association and has been the Director of Practice Review for the Alberta Land Surveyors' Association since 1997.

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