



Conference Report

FIDIC 1999 Conference “Expanding the Boundaries”

The Hague, The Netherlands, 19-24 September 1999

The International Federation of Consulting Engineers (FIDIC) and the Association of Consulting Engineers of the Netherlands (ONRI) organised a Conference on “Expanding the Boundaries” in the Hague, the Netherlands, 19-24 September, 1999. The objectives of this Conference were to explore the present challenges faced by consulting engineers and to analyse the best alternatives available for successfully meeting them, as well as to constructively discuss the challenges for the new millennium, and their implications for the consulting engineering firms. Approximately 600 participants from 50 different countries participated in the Conference.

In order to achieve these objectives, the Dutch consulting engineering sector (ranked third in the world) organised an excellent forum, both technically and socially. The plenary sessions were specially designed to be visionaries, thus setting the scene for discussions with very broad and analytical perspectives on issues which are leading, and could further lead, to changes in the future activities of consulting engineers. The key-note lectures included analysis of global growth patterns, the evolution of technology over time, global warming, constraints of space in urban areas, and water crisis. The concept of *ecocracy* was also discussed. Non-tangible concepts like sustainable development were effectively married with tangible ones, like costs and benefits in real terms.

It was recognised that the world is changing very rapidly, and with it, its needs, concerns and alternatives available for solutions. While in the past the role of the consulting engineers was mainly on technical issues, the present, and surely, future changes at the global level are demanding that the engineers play new and innovating roles. Skills on management-related issues, strategic planning, development of projects from an integral viewpoint, environmental and social issues as well as ethics, are important challenges that the consulting engineering field is likely to face on a regular basis in the coming decades. It was also argued that the days when foreign consultants could decide from their desks on the development and implementation of specific projects overseas, are now long past. Appropriate knowledge, visionary approaches, use of new technology, understanding of socio-economic needs, and recognition of cultural differences have become a must for those consulting engineers who wish to remain active abroad in the future.

The conference considered various issues which could well determine the successes or failures of consulting companies in the 21st century. The topics discussed covered a wide range of issues, ranging from technical innovations likely to take place in the coming decades and integrative project approaches, to fundamental issues which are normally not given enough attention at such gatherings, like the profiles of consulting engineers in order to strengthen their positions in society, and future directions and roles of consulting companies in a rapidly changing world.

FIDIC has recognised that radical changes are taking place not only in the engineering field but also in all other fields at the global level. The magnitudes and rapidity of these changes require special attention and major changes in strategies and approaches are needed from the engineering consulting firms. Probably one of the most notable facts was the urgency expressed by FIDIC in stressing the importance of considering new approaches and alternatives that match present and future needs in the global consulting field. Business as usual is no longer a feasible long-term option. This progressive attitude of FIDIC is in sharp contrast to most of the public sectors of the world, who still continue with a “business as usual” philosophy and who yet do not see the importance and relevance of new alternatives in different fields.

Thousands of meetings and conferences are held every year all over the world. However, vast majority of these meetings are best forgotten once they are over. Other international associations should consider the FIDIC Conference in the Hague as a model, in terms of its futuristic orientation, sharp focusing and excellent organisation of its both technical sessions and social events. In fact the FIDIC type of gatherings are likely to make a difference in delivering the message well beyond the conference halls, and in achieving their objectives.

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