

status

Madam,

I last wrote to *tce* some 15 years ago on this particular topic and again I will throw out some suggestions that could eventually lead to our improved status, but remember this sort of thing will not change overnight.

'Engineer' is in the common lexicon, anyone can use it. If the Engineering Council were to trademark 'Engineer' and control its use it would provide a means of putting clear water between the 'ingenious' and the 'engine'. It provides a chance for people to explain what they do, rather than be equated to a mechanic, which is still a valuable skill to have.

Bigger salaries. It won't happen but it would be simple. Engineers driving around in Ferraris, Bentleys, etc with big houses and you will soon get the 'footballer' status we seem to be seeking. More kids will want to be one because it is seen as a means to a 'good life'.

Stop trying to expand the profession. One of the reasons doctors, lawyers and accountants get their 'respect' is because people, more or less rightly, think that you have to work hard to get qualified. Not a small matter of supply and demand control also going on by limiting the number who qualify. Of course, the fact that major areas of their profession are protected by a status enshrined in law helps. It should be noted pharmacists have many of the same 'privileges' as lawyers, yet don't enjoy their status.

We all like to be respected and appreciated for what we do and I recently argued with someone that training as a doctor should not provide special dispensation. They argued that people limiting the funding might one day depend on those life-saving skills. I countered with the fact that most of everything that the doctor will use to save that life only exists because of the engineering input. If people don't know what we do then we'll never get any status or recognition, and not helping the 'public' at a personal level doesn't do us any favours.

In the end do we really crave this improved status? Why do we want it? Until we can honestly articulate those reasons, at least to ourselves, then we should probably just muddle along as we are.

Ed Fish

Manchester

deepwater concerns

Madam,

It is easy to be wise after the event, but reading BP's report about the causes of



“ why should things have come to such a pass in an industry where everyone working on the rig should have been well aware of the risks involved before the event? ”

the Deepwater Horizon accident (www.bp.com/sectiongenericarticle.do?categoryId=9034902&contentId=7064891) raises concerns.

Both BP and its contractors appear not to have followed best industry practice in the eight areas where the investigating committee identified non-performance of a protective barrier. This cannot be considered a probabilistic anomaly, but rather the consequence of a culture involving all parties that led the investigators to recommend that BP review its procedures pertaining to drilling and well ops, management systems, as well as the oversight and assurance of sub-contractors and service providers.

At the same time, the *Financial Times* reports that rival companies plan to review the report's recommendations in an effort to improve their own performances. One must assume that Transocean, Halliburton and Cameron will also be looking to review their procedures, as will the Minerals Management Service and most other supervisory, certification agencies and technical standard bodies.

Why should things have come to such a pass in an industry where everyone working on the rig should have been well aware of the risks involved before the event? Is it that people have become desensitised to the hazards involved or that they simply didn't understand the risks?

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For example, the rig was constructed some ten years ago, but I wonder if anyone ever thought it necessary to HAZOP the design of the drilling facilities or to think through the consequences of a major upset condition such as a blow-out. Would this have been the case if the operator had been required to prepare a safety case? The description of the mud gas separator detailed in the report shows that the vessel was designed to handle small amounts of gas, but not the quantities associated with a blow-out.

If such an upset condition had been identified and design of the rig's hazardous area classification, cold vent, flammable gas detection and emergency shut down systems been more rigorously assessed, then large volumes of gas would have been directed overboard and not over areas of the platform. This inevitably led to the explosion and loss of a final opportunity to contain flow from the well.

When, if ever, are we going to learn?

Robin Huttenbach

London, UK

reasonable doubt

Madam,

I was disappointed to read the letter from Dennis Twist in the latest issue of *tce* (September 2010) criticising Trevor Kletz for expressing doubts over the possible link between carbon dioxide and global warming. Mr Twist should realise that Trevor is not alone in having such doubts. A recent survey of the UK population by Ipsos Mori indicates that the proportion who believes that climate change is "definitely" a reality has dropped in the last year from 44% to 31% (*The Guardian*, 23 February 2010). Such a fall may be the result of recent bad publicity concerning the apparent errors propagated in IPCC reports and the alleged mis-handling of data by the University of East Anglia.

Sadly the last UK government, and [then-environment minister] Ed Miliband in

“ a recent survey of the UK population by Ipsos Mori indicates that the proportion who believes that climate change is a reality has dropped in the last year from 44% to 31% ”

speaking up

Madam,

Scientists, technologists and engineers continue to crucially influence all aspects of society; however their voice is often soft, unnoticed and ignored [for reasons well known to any regular reader of this page – Ed].

As a result, too many opportunities are wasted. The UK squandered the lead it had in nuclear technology during the 1970s; the dash for North Sea oil took little account of national interest or anything other than the search for higher and higher returns, which left technologists and engineers marginalised at senior and board level. The decision by several oil giants to reduce their research effort and outsource many of their engineering skills leaves the companies exposed to difficulties when major accidents or global events occur.

The loss of ICI in many ways sums up how poor strategic thinking can ruin manufacturing and engineering companies. Here was a company in the 1970s that was world-leading, genuinely innovative and with an in-house ability to develop its own new and exciting technology. Within a decade, poor decisions made by its board and the rush for a quick profit saw ICI broken up into fragments.

There are too many such examples to blame coincidence. Civil servants, politicians, scientists and engineers were either not seeing the mistakes or not rectifying them. Something needs to be done to prevent a future recurrence.

particular, appeared to be brain-washed by the climate change theories and even wanted to 'declare war on climate change sceptics' (*The Observer*, 31 January 2010). Such attitudes are most unhelpful and one can only hope the new coalition adopts a more reasoned and questioning approach to such theories. The launch of the Global Warming Policy Foundation will, it is hoped, provide a more balanced view.

I think almost everyone accepts that global warming is happening but many of us do not accept the alleged link with carbon dioxide. The earth's temperatures have fluctuated up and down throughout its history over millions of years and will no doubt continue to do so. Almost everyone would support the diversification of energy sources, the use of renewables,

“ From the bottom up, every scientist and engineer should defend and articulate science and engineering ”

Board-level technologists should defend their position against financially dominated ceos. Learned bodies such as the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering and the professional institutions need to be proactive in talking to politicians and the media. Most importantly, representatives from all sides – companies, politicians, academics, financiers – need to find better ways of working together and help steer technology in the right direction, and to educate younger generations about the power and the dangers of technological advances.

The UK, Europe and the world need to make better decisions about how new technology is assimilated into the economy. Hindsight is easy; correctly assessing issues of new technology is much more challenging.

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energy saving and even carbon capture and storage. However, politicians and climate change disciples should realise that it will be very difficult to impose restrictions on cheap air travel or the use of the private car until the general public are convinced that climate change is a reality. The sceptics will certainly resist such restrictions!

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