Report on a Case by the Board of Ethical Review

Case No. 77-2

Dual Use of Business Card

Facts:
John Doe, P.E., a partner in a consulting engineering firm, is elected president of a state engineering society. He proposes to print on the other side of his regular business card a separate showing of his name, the address, and telephone number of the state engineering society office, and with the additional reference: President, _____ Engineering Society."

Question:
Would a dual business-professional society card as described be ethical?

References:
Code of Ethics-Section 1(g)-"He will avoid any act tending to promote his own interest at the expense of the dignity and integrity of the profession."

Section 3(a)-"The Engineer shall not advertise his professional services but may utilize the following means of identification:

Section 3(a)(3)-"Brochures, business cards, letterheads, and other factual representations of experience, facilities, personnel, and capacity to render service, providing the same are not misleading relative to the extent of participation in the projects cited, and provided the same are not indiscriminately distributed."

Discussion:
Prior to a change in the code in 1973, then-section 3(d) stated that an engineer "…will not use his professional affiliations…to secure personal advantage…." The Board of Directors deleted that language in 1973 on the basis of a state society resolution stating that the basis for the change was that "professional improvement is certainly a personal advantage and one should be encouraged to utilize professional affiliation to develop professional improvement."

Whether the change was wise, or whether the reason for the change was a sound one is not for us to determine. As often stated, we take the code as it stands.

Although it may be contended that the intent of the board was to permit the use of professional affiliations to secure business benefits, we think that the quoted history and other present provisions in the code justify a reading that such was not the intent.

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Section 3(a)(3) quite clearly spells out the permissible material to be used on a business card, all related to factual representations to render service, meaning service to clients or the public generally. The use of one card tying on both the private practice identification and the showing of high office in a state engineering society would extend the card beyond the limited private practice aspect permitted by the code. To that extent we believe it might mislead prospective clients or others receiving the card into believing that Engineer Doe was superior to other engineers engaged in providing similar services, and would further tend to raise concerns among other members of the society and the public generally that the society was being used for personal purposes. We particularly note that §1(g) imposes a duty on engineers to avoid any activity, even if well intentioned, which might raise suspicion of self interest detrimental to the larger interest of the profession.

When holding high office in a professional society an engineer should feel a special obligation to avoid any conduct or practice which might cast doubt on the public service aspect of the society's interests and activities. While we must acknowledge that the issue is not without doubt in view of the change in the code, as described, we believe that the more scrupulous approach for Engineer Doe or any other engineer holding office in a professional society should be to lean over backwards to divorce his or her personal interests from the larger and more altruistic interests of the society represented on behalf of all of its members.

Conclusion:*
It would not be ethical for Engineer Doe to have a dual business/professional society card as described.

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Board of Ethical Review
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