



From time to time, it is necessary for all organizations to take a look at themselves from an organizational perspective to determine whether they are still able to do what they promise to do in the most effective manner. In the case of the SAIMM, this meant looking at our Constitution very carefully, as that is the set of rules according to which we operate. The last important review was in 2006, when it was changed to allow the incorporation of branches in other countries in southern Africa on an equal footing. We became the Southern African Institute of Mining and Metallurgy.

The outcome of the latest review was mostly encouraging. For 108 years (and counting) we are still on the track we promised to be on, essentially providing a platform for communication. However, there were also a few items that are now either impossible or impractical to do according to the Constitution.

Back in the days when the Constitution was created, the main activity of the SAIMM was to have general meetings at which important technical matters of the day were discussed. In order to preserve new knowledge that was created for later generations, records were kept of the discussions and later the Journal was born.

We no longer have general meetings, apart from the Annual General Meeting. That activity has gone over to our branches and the various symposia and conferences.

Looking at the document as it stands, it certainly was effective to govern the societal activities of a small number of people in a small geographical area. When changes were necessary, it was relatively easy to make the necessary amendments.

Now, with the much larger society covering a very wide geographical area (which will be more than five million square kilometres once the DRC Branch has been formalized as opposed to the area of Johannesburg when the Institute was created) we need more flexibility to react quicker.

Council will therefore recommend a structural change to accommodate the needs of our much-enlarged Institute. There will be a shorter main body of the Constitution which will essentially be the backbone, cementing the structure and the essence of who we are and what we do. That will stay as it is and will be amended only with the authority of the broad membership.

Attached to that will be a set of Bylaws containing the details of what is necessary for effective operation. For instance, the existing Constitution allows Council to create Committees, but no Committees are mentioned. Over time, an effective way of working with four main committees has developed, namely the two Technical Programme Committees, Membership, and Publications. While they are not prohibited by the Constitution, their duties and manner of operation are not governed by rules in all instances and they do not all have official recognition.

The new proposal will fill this gap. There will be separate Bylaws for each Committee.

The important difference is that the details of how the job is done, as contained in the Bylaws, will be able to be changed by the elected Council without having to embark on the unnecessarily onerous task of obtaining full membership approval for each little change.

This manner of working is actually allowed by the current Constitution. The new proposal will merely highlight this and shift some of the detail from the Constitution to the Bylaws.

The other change, which has already been implemented, is to reduce the frequency of Council Meetings from monthly to quarterly. This is allowed by the current Constitution.

Over the recent past, it was noticed that attendance at Council meetings dwindled to the extent that at occasions, we barely had a quorum. Most of the time of Council was taken up by routine reporting of committees and important decisions were not always required. Council members are volunteers, and being in senior positions in industry, all operate under tremendous time pressure.

Another problem was that it was understandably difficult for the chairpersons of remote branches to attend monthly meetings in Johannesburg. This meant that the voices of members in other countries were not heard in Council, and consequently we did not fully operate in reality as a regional society.

With the quarterly meetings, the routine considerations of committee reports are performed by Office Bearers, and Council is then concerned more with strategic matters and overviews of quarterly reports. It is now also possible for the Institute to provide travel assistance for our remote chairpersons to attend Council meetings. This is a positive step in the direction of really being a regional, as opposed to a national, society.

With this move, Office Bearers did not take on the responsibility to take decisions on behalf of the Institute. That responsibility still rests with the elected Council. Office Bearers merely took the load of the more mundane daily management issues off Council's shoulders.

The outcome of this change was that we moved from barely having quorums at meetings to having to bring in additional chairs to seat everyone.

Please review the proposed changes to the Constitution carefully. There will be a Special General Meeting immediately before the Annual General Meeting, at which we hope to get approval from members for the new proposal, which will enable our Institute to operate more effectively in challenging times.

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