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Championing member engagement

Chris Champion explains why IPWEA
expansion to NZ has been a success

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IPWEA leads with online member services

The Institute of Public Works Engineering Australia (IPWEA) has merged with its New Zealand counterpart to form a robust Australasian association. **Chris Champion** discusses the journey to its unification.

Tell us about your career

I started my career as a Cadet Civil Engineer working in Local Government. I then worked as a City Engineer and Director of Engineering Services for 12 out of my 30-year-long career in Local Government. Following that I embarked on a very satisfying career in association management and was appointed Chief Executive of the Institute of Public Works Engineering Australia (IPWEA) in the year 2000.

I hold formal tertiary qualifications in Engineering, Management and Internet Marketing. In 2009, I was awarded the James Hill Prize from the Institution of Civil Engineers in London. I am also the Immediate Past President of the International Federation of Municipal Engineering (2006-2009).

A highlight of my career was being nominated in the Engineers Australia Top 100 Most Influential Engineers in Australia.

What is the history, role and structure of IPWEA?

IPWEA has been around for over 100 years in NSW but the national organisation was formed in 1999. At this time, the association also changed its former name from the Institute of Municipal Engineering Australia (IMEA) to incorporate a wider public works focus.

IPWEA is a Federation with seven Divisions, with the recent merge of our New Zealand counterpart organisation coming under the umbrella of IPWEA. Now there is also an IPWEA New Zealand Division and the A in IPWEA now stands for Australasia. The addition of New Zealand saw a 45 per cent increase in membership from 2,200 to 3,200 members overnight. New Zealand is now our largest Division.

IPWEA's vision is to be recognised locally and internationally as the leading professional association that effectively informs, connects, represents and leads public works professionals in Australasia. Our mission is to enhance the quality of life of our communities through public works and services.

Members are drawn from a wide cross section of the public works sector and include professional engineers, project managers, landscape architects, parks managers, fleet managers and other technical staff, consultants, contractors and suppliers. Our members are responsible for the planning, design, construction and maintenance of the roads, drains, parks and public buildings in our communities.

The association is recognised internationally as a leader in the implementation of sustainable approaches to infrastructure, asset management and financial planning.

Tell us about the recent merger with New Zealand

IPWEA has always had a very good relationship with INGENIUM with what then was our counterpart organisation in New Zealand. Last year INGENIUM undertook a strategic review of its direction and showed interest in the technology and communications platform used by IPWEA.

Our iMIS membership and contact database, and integrated Higher Logic website and communities of practice are provided as heavily subsidised opt-in services to IPWEA Divisions. It became apparent that New Zealand could seriously benefit from accessing these services by becoming a division of IPWEA.

Within a year, the members and Directors of both organisations strongly supported New Zealand becoming a division of IPWEA. Being a Federation has allowed the former New Zealand entity to remain in existence as an independently operated organisation, and become part of the larger IPWEA family.

For IPWEA in Australia, the larger organisation allows us to extend our reach across the waters to a greater membership and contact base. There are significant opportunities to enhance the exchange of skills, experience and innovation across the Tasman.

How does IPWEA stay innovative and relevant to members?

The association is achieving some important successes from integrating its technology and communications strategies.

The strategy commenced some time back with implementing our iMIS membership and contact database and integrating it with our financial systems and event registration processes. This provided the foundations to launch a new website, fully integrated into the backend to our database.

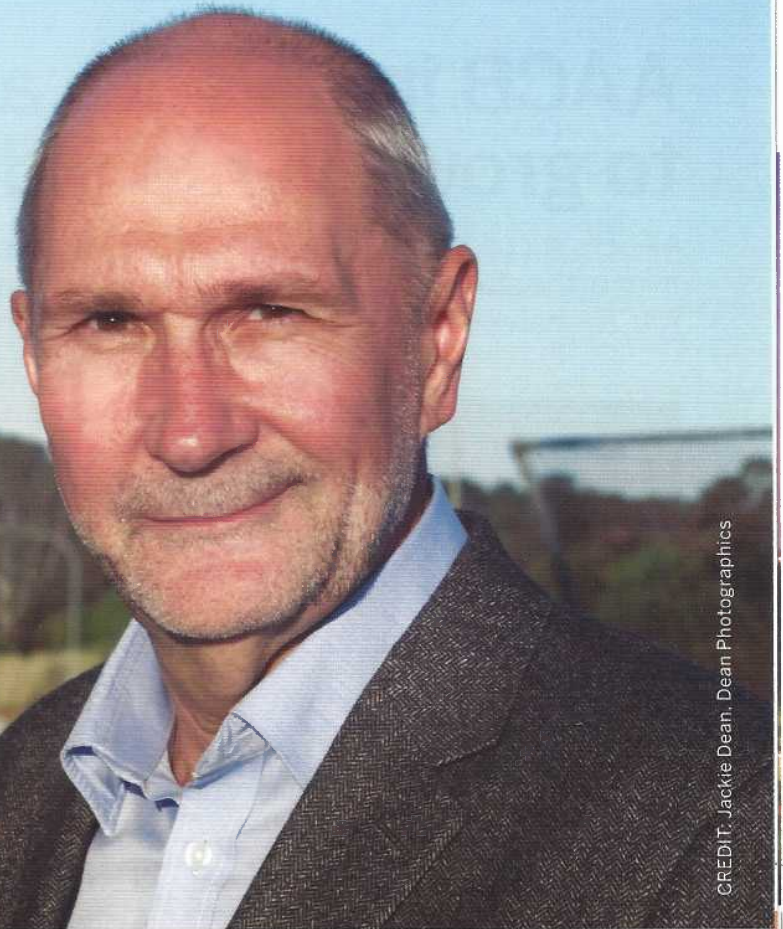
The new approach adopted was the front end of the Higher Logic private community networking platform. This placed a strong focus on user generated content and community forums. The IPWEA's five online communities of practice launched a few months after the website and included our Ask Your Mates Open Forum, which has been key to driving growth for our database. We have been able to position our forum as the premier place to discuss public works issues, ahead of any LinkedIn community or forum.

The database has grown to over 14,000 individuals and organisations – almost five times our membership, and is growing at a rate of 25 per cent per annum.

A key decision was made to subscribe our total database to our new communities of practice (based on past interest areas) and also to the Ask Your Mates Open Forum. Importantly, we also allowed the creation of free web accounts.



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CREDIT: Jackie Dean, Dean Photographics

Chris Champion, CEO, IPWEA

Almost all IPWEA divisions have now opted into the central membership database and it is our hope that a full transition will be completed in coming months.

At the launch of the new website in 2011, it received around 4,000 visits per month. The launch of our communities of practice and open forum in early 2012 saw this grow to 7,000 visits per month.

The next element of the communication strategy was to refresh and re-launch IPWEA's *Public Works Professional* magazine. Working with Mahlab Media, IPWEA has taken a multi-channelled approach to its communications. It also launched two new newsletters targeting two key communities of practice: asset management and fleet management.

All magazine and newsletter articles are posted as blogs on the IPWEA website. These are automatically tweeted to IPWEA's fledging social media audience. The magazine is published in hard copy as a member benefit and then there is a digital edition distributed to the entire database.

The newsletters and magazine generate significant spikes in traffic to the IPWEA website. Since the launch two years ago, monthly visits to the website have more than trebled to over 12,000 hits per month.

The use of video has also been introduced. Various sessions and highlights of our recent international conference in Darwin were filmed. This allowed us to build on the conference post-Darwin, make the most of the launch of Young IPWEA at the conference, and create more material to promote our conference in 2015.

The communities of practice, the re-launch of the magazine, newsletters and blogs are having a dramatic impact on the branding, profile, positioning and marketing of IPWEA. It is currently ranked number one for member engagement and membership value in benchmarking surveys.

What initiatives are planned going forward?

Some things currently being explored or implemented include an eLearning strategy; a common membership fee across all divisions; building on the recent launch of Young IPWEA to provide more focus on developing leaders for tomorrow; and redesigning our website landing pages following a recent strategic review.

IPWEA has a forward pipeline of new publications and industry practice notes. The business model is to research and publish much needed professional resources for our members and the wider sector generally. These are the basis for rolling out support training workshops and sometimes lead to part of our subscription service offerings.

IPWEA has been positioned globally and delivers workshops across three provinces in Western Canada and Hong Kong. There has been interest in its work from Malaysia, Indonesia, Denmark, Finland and the United States.

An association that is informing, connecting and representing members, IPWEA is also providing leadership for members and the wider public works sector. •••