

# Audio transcript

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Notes: Transcript has been edited for cleaner reading.

**Lucy Olivier:** Welcome along to this IStructE member talk. I'm Lucy Olivier, Membership Recruitment and Engagement Manager at the Institution. Joining me today, I have David Rafferty, Chair of the Applications and Professional Review Panel, and Paola Casagrande from the Fellow Mentoring Group, which is part of the *Elevate* mentoring platform. I'll hand over to you, David, to introduce yourself.

**David Rafferty:** Hi, so I'm David Rafferty. As Lucy said, I'm the Chair of the Applications and Professional View Panel. I've been on the Panel for a number of years now, several of those as chair. I've been a Fellow for about five years now and I work in South East London for a medium-sized consultancy working on arts, culture and heritage projects.

**Lucy:** Brilliant. Thanks, David. And over to you Paola for a little bit of an introduction.

**Paola Casagrande:** Hi, I'm Paola Casagrande. I'm a Chartered Structural Engineer and a Fellow of the Institution. I've been in the industry for over 25 years. I work for Ramboll. I'm based in the UK, but I'm the Health and Safety Lead for the global buildings part of the business in Ramboll. I'm involved in a number of initiatives for the Institution. As you said, I'm part of the *Elevate* initiative, so I'm a mentor. I went through the mentoring myself and now I'm giving back through my mentoring work. I'm also in the Health and Safety and Wellbeing Panel and I help at the local level. I'm a Past Chair of the Regional Group and I'm still involved locally.

**Lucy:** Thanks, Paola. And today you both join me to talk about the Fellowship grade and the application process, hopefully debunking some of the myths, along with the amendment to the Fellowship guidance at the start of this year. Paola, could I start by asking you why the Fellowship Mentoring Group proposed a change to the guidance?

**Paola:** So, as I said, I went through the mentoring process myself and we as a group, we had some thoughts around how we felt, are we ready, are we actually meeting what the guidance suggests, and then I started mentoring other groups and they had similar concerns and questions. So, we put forward what we thought for considerations to the Institution, and I'm really pleased that the feedback has been listened to and the guidance has been amended to take this into account.

So, if we go through a couple of the points I'm particularly happy with seeing changed. I think overall now the emphasis in defining a Fellow as a structural engineer that has a significant impact on the profession, people or the planet. So that's the emphasis now. And although, you know, it's still very much relevant and

worthy of Fellowship, it's not just about seniority or big teams and big portfolios. So actually, there's a lot more clarity in suggesting that Fellowship is about leadership as a structural engineer, regardless of the size of your portfolio. So that's the most significant one I'm really happy to see.

Lucy: Brilliant. Thanks, Paola. And David, I know in reviewing the guidance, a big focus of the Task Group was to ensure that the newly revised guidance, reflects the Panel's expectations. Can you tell us a little bit about what it is that the Panel's looking for in an ideal Fellowship application?

David: Yeah, so as a Panel, even before the guidance changed, we took quite a wide view and we're looking for leadership and a positive impact and personal significant responsibility and commitments to the profession. How that was demonstrated was we purely took it in a wider sense than the way it was written down in the old guidance. So, the new guidance more carefully spells out that we're looking for a wider range of things. And hopefully it will mean that people won't be unnecessarily put off. And we definitely look at evidence overall rather than things specifically. Fellowship is a title conferred by the Institution itself so we're answerable only as the Institution, we don't need to stick to the Engineering Council rules like we do for CEng. So, we're able to be much more open to alternative ways of demonstrating things.

Lucy: Great. Thanks, David. I'm sure that further detail as well will be really beneficial for someone looking to apply for Fellowship. As you sort of touched on, it's the highest achievement offered through membership of the Institution.

With that, Paola, do you come across any misconceptions from people that you're mentoring or have mentored in the past? And how is it that the *Elevate* mentoring platform and the Fellowship Mentoring Group help candidates prepare for their application?

Paola: Regarding common misconceptions or questions commonly raised, I would say one that I got often is "I don't manage anyone", and they think that because of that, they shouldn't apply or, their application will be very, very weak. And usually these are people in a role where they have a lot of influence as structural engineers. For example, they may be responsible for the technical quality of a whole structural department, regardless of whether they've got direct reports or not; or a massive portfolio of projects they are responsible for from a technical point of view. And their impact is huge, but they were worried about how the organogram will look, you know: "Oh, I don't have any big teams or I don't, you know, manage anybody".

So, since the guidance has been changed now and they talk about the showing an area of influence, which is a really good way of putting this, and this way a candidate can show how much they influence in the profession or in general the industry rather than traditional organogram, "I report to such and such and I manage this number of people". Also, there was particular concern for "I don't manage anyone" for specialist or academics and they have a wealth of experience and knowledge despite the not managing not managing people. So, it's I'm really pleased to see that that's has been changed in the new guidance.

I'm also happy to see that seniority has been removed from the guidance, so there's more of an emphasis on leadership. This addresses another common concern I've heard about, which is, "Am I senior enough?" And that's a really positive step too, as David said, [the Panel] were looking at this before, but the

guidance may have been not so clear. So, there were lots of questions raised on that.

Although it's primarily about technical excellence, I often see that mentees play down the role they have in developing the next generation of structural engineers. These are really valuable achievements that should sit alongside their technical achievement that may be like projects or specialists, financial outcomes. So that's another thing that I would like people to consider, how much they actually contributed to developing the next generations. And the last one I would like to mention is I get asked often, "Can I become a Fellow without having any significant involvement with the institution?". My response generally is that, of course, I would encourage anyone to get involved and give back to the Institution. And surely, if you are involved with Institution, that's definitely one of your achievements to be proud of, to include in the application, but it's not a mandatory one, provided you can demonstrate five achievements.

Regarding what the Fellowship Mentoring is, or at least how I approach it when I do my group mentoring, Sometimes people do not see themselves as ready or they tend to downplay their achievements and being in a group and sharing the achievement and helps yourself see yourself through the eyes of others. And that's a good way to build confidence with the application and allow the others to actually critique the application and say "You just sort of gloss over this, but actually that was a really cool thing that you did, and you should include it". And that stems from my own personal experience of being mentored in a group where I was encouraged and mentored towards applying for Fellowship. And I would have not done it if it wasn't for past president Tanya de Hoog that invited me to join one of the mentoring groups. So, it helps building that confidence in submitting an application.

Mentoring also helps shaping a robust application. And I think David is going to talk a bit about what a good application is about. As I've gone through a few now and I can answer most of the questions that the candidates raise. And also, when I don't know the answer, I have contacts to ask, or I've been through before or I know to reach out in the Institution to find the answer.

A couple more points. Another great benefit of the group mentoring is that it acts as a kind of an external deadline. So, it helps move things along because nobody wants to be the one at the next meeting, not having done anything to progress the application. We are all very busy so if we just do it for ourselves, we just put it to the bottom of the piles and it progresses very, very slowly.

And finally, I also found that the process of going through and reflecting on the career has been a great opportunity to stop and reflect on my career and my achievement, which is something most people do not often do, and you don't have the time to do it. And actually, it's a good self-reflection that I really, really valued and I see the people I mentor valuing.

Lucy:

Great. Thanks, Paola. It sounds like the group is really providing quite a valuable service to those looking to apply for Fellowship. And on your last point as well, it sounds like as well as achieving that designation, it's a nice personal reflection as well to put your application together. So, thank you so much for sharing that.

David, I wondered if you had any practical insight based on what Paola's discussed there, to help candidates align their applications with the guidance. And if you have any examples of what good evidence or what a good application might look like?

David: The key things we're looking for when we review the applications is making sure it's personal. It's very hard after many years in the corporate or business world to write a report where you describe a project in terms of 'I did this and I was responsible' rather than the project benefits from. But it's really, really important to make sure you own the decisions you made in the project and that you own the contribution you made and make it very clear that this is a project that was you, it wasn't, you weren't just a small part of it, was, or if you were, you make clear what your part was and make sure you explain in detail what your personal contribution was.

The guidance asks for a statement that sets out your five key achievements. So, it's important you actually do set out five discernible achievements as, one, two, three, four and five, rather than a big block of text, leaving the reviewers to try and pick out five things from amongst different bits. That often leads to interview or rejection if we find we can't immediately identify five things, which doesn't happen very often, but it does happen. And try and make sure that they're distinct and personal and again personal. And maybe refer back to some of the examples given in the document, which are the sort of main examples, but then it's not an exhaustive list. There are things that don't form part of that list of examples that are perfectly good fellow attributes, but they just, they're not quite as common.

Also, the document doesn't need to be a polished, glossy publication done with the benefit of your in-house marketing team. But having some good images and having it clearly set out really does help the reviewers in their review. We read everything that you send us. It's always reviewed by at least two people, if not three or four. And we discuss each application at our meetings to decide to make sure we come to a considered view. So, making it easy to follow and making it easy to read and follow the thread of your key achievements is one of the main things that makes it easy for us to review and easy for us to recommend election as a fellow.

Lucy: Brilliant. Thanks, David. That's really helpful. At HQ we try to guide members to provide something in a clear format so that would help the Panel to review their application in an easier and straightforward manner so that we are seeing more concise applications being presented to the Panel. We're always happy to help you as well in the Membership Team if you've got any questions regarding your application.

Before we finish up today, I'd like to ask you both what one piece of advice you'd like to give a candidate looking to apply for Fellowship. Paola, perhaps if we could start with you.

Paola: My one piece of advice would be to own your achievement and don't be shy. I've seen it often that people feel like I'm boasting, and I can't say this. And they say either like David said "We did" instead of "I did" or think this is not really an achievement. That's not such a great thing that I've done when actually it is, and you should be proud. And it's difficult to talk about yourself in those terms. But, you did achieve great things as a structural engineer. Just don't be shy and own it. So that would be my piece of advice.

Lucy: Thanks, Paola. That's great advice. What about you, David? What advice would you give?

David: I think that if I'm going to give one piece of advice, it would be to pick your supporter well. Make sure they know enough about you to make really positive, unqualified statements when they're asked about how long they've known you and what your

work has been like over the last few years. We do sometimes see applications from people who were a fellow who has been asked for a reference, and they've said, "Oh, I knew them 10 years ago, but I don't know what they've done since". That straight away makes us nervous about the application. Whereas if they say, "Oh, I've known them four years and they've worked on this and they've delivered this and they've been leading this bit and supporting these people", then even though it's four years, not five, we're much more swayed by that than we would by someone who'd known you for five years, but you only ever saw them at evening Institution meetings.

Lucy: Brilliant. Thanks, David. And was there a second bit of advice hiding there, or was it just the one?

David: Just the one.

Lucy: Just the one. Perfect. Just because you said the one piece of advice, I thought there might be more.

Thanks David, Paola, thanks so much for your time today. I'm hopeful we've debunked some myths around the Fellowship application. Hopefully we'll continue to see some fantastic Fellowship applications at the upcoming Applications and Professional Review Panels for the Panel to assess.

But that's all for now. Thanks so much for listening and thanks for joining me today, David and Paola.

David: Thank you

Paola: Thank you.