



Council End of Term Full Report - 2009

(Highlights from this report appear in the Summer 2009 *EQ*)

We are Equity Council.

We are a dedicated group of your peers, elected from each region of the country, who have been working tirelessly over the past (almost) 3 years to guide Equity today, and to shape it for tomorrow. Well, perhaps tirelessly is not quite the right word—it is not a small task that Council does and we have worked our way through an enormous agenda. Unflaggingly is perhaps more accurate.

Council answers to you, the membership, which owns Equity. With the start of a new term on the horizon, we want to bring you up to date on how we have acted on your behalf during this term. We hope this report will become a regular habit through future Councils as well.

We began the term with lofty goals, and a long list of objectives – identified through member input – that we hoped to achieve. I suppose I should start by declaring that we have not achieved all of them, although not for lack of trying. The topics of most interest to the members are not exactly trivial ones, and few of them can be addressed by quick or easily-found answers.

We work hard to approach each of the important issues on our agenda from a national perspective, to research as thoroughly as possible beforehand, and to come prepared to engage in fair, open and knowledgeable debate before making decisions. After all, we are entrusted with being the voice of 5,500 people who cannot be gathered around the Council table.

Principal Projects

Member Survey

Our first major project was the completion of a detailed survey of the membership, an initiative conceived of in the prior term and completed in 2008.

We received 1036 submissions, which is a solid and highly representative result from a membership the size of ours. Specifically, it provided a margin of error of 2.74%, at a 95% confidence level. This means that if we had conducted the same survey 100 times, the results would deviate less than 3% from those we received, 95% of the time, no matter which random subset of members responded. This represents an excellent data set from which to work.

The information collected has already been used on several topics, most notably our review of member benefits and services, and the development of policy on diversity issues. The data will be of similar use in upcoming discussions on insurance and member-initiated production. Council anticipates that the survey results will continue to inform our deliberations for another 4 years or so, before they risk becoming outdated. In recognition of this, we have already scheduled topic-based follow-up work through next term and major update work beginning in 2012.

Further details on the survey results, and the uses to which we have put it (so far) have appeared in the Council Link, and the full survey summary is posted online, so I won't repeat that material here.

Member Benefits and Services (Ends) Review

Council's job is to act as an informed agent of the members in guiding the organisation at its highest level. A key part of that is knowing, on an ongoing basis, what the members expect from Equity in exchange for their dues, and so that was the first subject we tackled after the survey was complete.

The results showed us that Equity was, for the most part, providing the services that the members need and want, but that some priorities and resource allocations were not in sync with the relative importance you assigned to various benefits. Accordingly, support for members in their pursuit of future contracts, and advocacy at all levels of public policy have seen a major boost in priority, and some peripheral services have moved to a lower level of resource allotment. A thorough report on all the changes appeared in an earlier Council Link.

There was no widespread call for new benefits or services, but you did ask for improvement in our insurance plan, and in our handling of member-initiated production. The topics highlighted by the membership were put into Council's work plan, for prioritized inclusion in our agenda.

Diversity Issues

As most members will be aware, diversity issues have been front and centre on our agenda since completing the survey, and we have worked on the topic solidly for the past 18 months. Again, this is a subject that I have covered at length in the Council Link, and a report on the final policy changes was published online in mid-May.

In brief, Council has introduced By-Law and policy changes to promote a representative diversity within Council, its regional CPAGs, on committees struck for advisory purposes, and in any open solicitation of members for owner consultation purposes. These changes require the inclusion of a diversity statement in requests for member involvement, special effort to ensure all members are equally aware of the opportunity for participation, and specific outreach to those communities from which participation has historically been lacking.

Council has also introduced new policy to include:

- equal access to work opportunities as a benefit priority;
- advocacy in favour of public policy to encourage artistic activity representative and respectful of Canada's evolving population;
- flexibility within Equity consistent with a high regard for cultural variation in live performance practice and process;
- professional development support specifically acknowledging the breadth and depth of Equity's diverse membership;
- prohibition of discriminatory practices in Equity's administration and delivery of member services; and
- specific consideration of cultural variation in evaluating concession requests.

Finally, Council has adopted a new Ends policy that summarizes the outcome of all other Ends as contributing to a live performance environment reflecting the diversity of the greater community. Actual policy wording can be found in the Policy Governance Document.

There is a lot to be proud of in our work on this topic, and I commend all of Council for pursuing the subject so thoroughly. We have concluded everything but the member feedback phase, which should be well under way by mid-summer. Effective immediately, assessment of progress in this area and periodic adjustment to policy as needed will be part of our annual monitoring and review cycle. Diversity is now perpetually on Council's radar, alongside all items of similar importance to the membership.

Identity Data

We gleaned a key item of new data from our survey, and that was the "identity" of a sizable portion of our membership. Over 90% of respondents chose to declare an identity, within the confidential and cautious use framework we set out, and that has allowed us to move away from anecdotal consideration of diversity topics, and to draw it in to the realm of the concrete and measurable. Seeking identity information is always a touchy matter, and the fact that so many responded so freely was fantastic.

Having this information affords us the ability to track changes into the future – there is no point in implementing new policy if you don't also implement the mechanism to see if it produces results. In order for this data to stay current as Equity's membership changes over time, it will be necessary to ask the question on a periodic basis. We encourage all members to show the same generosity of spirit evidenced by the survey respondents in replying when asked.

RRSP Funds

One of our chronic problems over the years has been the sizable number of new members who fail to open a proper RRSP account into which we can deposit their retirement contributions deducted at source. You'd think that, in this business, members would be anxious to hold onto every penny owed to them. And yet, as much as \$60,000 per year goes unclaimed because members don't take the very simple steps required to have their money deposited in their name. Makes you wonder, doesn't it: who are these people? If you don't need the money, I know we could drum up some willing recipients with no effort at all.

As nice as it is to direct some of that money each year to The Actors' Fund of Canada, Council thinks it would be a much better idea to put your money where it was meant to go. Accordingly, we created a detailed policy directing staff to minimize these unallocated funds, and that project is now under way. Council will be monitoring progress in this area very closely through the remainder of the term and into the future. We have also created far more stringent requirements for the handling of investment contributions and now require member participation the choice of RRSP funds being offered.

Professional Development Funding

For years, Equity has offered subsidies for a range of professional development activities, although usage rates have remained quite modest. A comprehensive review of existing guidelines resulted in many restrictions being eased, and also in the transfer of responsibility to the Executive Director.

Without having to tie application deadlines to Council schedules, submissions can now be made at any time, and success in disbursing the funds will be measured on the same basis as all other member benefits. We hope to see markedly improved usage through these changes, so that members continue to have support in this area.

New Member Joining Process

A good portion of this term was spent working on both the mechanics of welcoming new members into the Association, and a review of the avenues through which members join. Policy drafting on the first part of this is complete.

Review of the joining process resulted in a list of expectations we plan to implement as part of the process through which new members are welcomed into Equity. These include such things as ensuring that new members are:

- provided with links to key personal resources, both on staff and within the membership, and to key information resources;
- introduced to key benefits of membership;
- required to acknowledge key obligations of membership;
- solicited for questions and feedback on their joining experience; and
- encouraged to be part of ongoing dialogue with the Association.

The second part of this work is much more challenging. Equity is unusual in that third parties, theatre engagers, create most of our new members. Because of this, Equity is not really in control of who joins and how, except with the negotiated agreement of outside organisations. That is why we began the discussion with the portions of the process which we can directly control – no matter how new members arrive on our doorstep, they should experience a consistent welcome when they do, begin their membership with the most useful information already in their hands, and have ready access to more. Examining controls on the acceptance of new members is a topic Council intends to pursue in some detail, beginning in June.

On the Horizon

There are no shortage of issues for Council to deal with, and we assemble a work plan each year to ensure that we can devote due time to all of them. The following topics are ones on which Council recently has or soon will begin work.

Insurance Plan

The next topic of major review is our health insurance plan. Although we began Council education on the topic many months ago, it has taken quite some time to get meaningful usage statistics from our insurer. ACE/INA, understandably, tracks claims in some detail from a risk and expense perspective. Fine for them, but not what we want. Council's discussions will be focussed on what our members need by way of coverage, and having developed a firm vision on that, we will incorporate monetary considerations from there.

Survey results show that only 38% of members are decidedly satisfied with Equity's insurance plan, with an equal amount declaring neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction. Roughly one-quarter of respondents declare dissatisfaction of some sort. Clearly, we have some work to do in this area. We are also aware that Equity members who are members of ACTRA have expressed interest in combining or harmonising their plans or their premiums, and Council will be looking into that as well.

As part of this process, we will be going back out to the members for more detailed input, particularly to help us come up with a workable standard of affordability. We can insure everybody for everything at all times, but every type of coverage comes at a cost to the members. Council is committed to meeting the needs of the greatest number of members, within their ability to afford it.

Member-initiated Production

We knew going into the survey that improvement in how Equity deals with member-initiated production was a topic of active interest within the membership. Although over 60% of respondents who had participated in member-initiated production in the three-year scope of the survey expressed satisfaction with the process, a sizable minority (one-third) did not. This finding was backed up by the submission of a member resolution at the recent National AGM

in February, calling on Council to commence a detailed review of existing engagement policies aimed at the “member-creator” sector. Council has added this to its agenda, and work will commence once insurance discussions are largely complete.

Harassment Policy and Hearings Procedure

In response to member concern, Council will also be reviewing how Equity deals with complaints of harassment. It has been brought to our attention that the current process may actually discourage reporting and pursuit of complaints. This effort will dovetail with an ongoing initiative to bring more detail to our By-Laws on Complaints Hearings.

Internal Matters

In addition to all the work done to address concerns raised directly by the members, there has also been considerable attention paid to keeping the administration and governance of the organisation in good shape.

New Executive Director

First and foremost was our need to find a new Executive Director following the departure of Susan Wallace in 2007. As might be imagined, finding someone with the experience and skill required to run a national organisation of our size is much more involved than posting a notice in the help wanted classifieds. With the assistance of a skilled executive search firm, Council was able to welcome Arden R. Ryshpan to the position within a few months, and we have forged a very close working relationship with her since that time. Arden’s understanding of the business, and dedication to the goals of Equity will serve members well into the future.

Policy Governance

I realize that any mention of PG can cause members’ eyes to glaze over, but it has a direct impact on the ongoing operations of Council and it has figured prominently in the work of this term – I can’t not mention it as part of this report. If you really have no interest in this subject at all, you will be forgiven for skipping directly to the next section.

Council converted to PG in the final year of the last term, and I have only positive assessment on the level of organisation this has brought to our work. PG is a very rigorous approach to board governance, and there are times when it feels a bit restrictive, but the structure has proved to be very beneficial in the long run. It has helped us to tackle an enormous range of topics, thoroughly and without letting any slip through the cracks.

It has also ensured that no aspect of Equity’s business goes unexamined or evaluated on a regular basis. It is our view that Council should never find itself in the position of having to say to the members, “Really? We had no idea that was going on!” We are elected to be aware of and responsible for all things on behalf of the members, and we take that responsibility very seriously. The framework of PG plays a large role in our ability to do that successfully.

I’d like to share one brief example of the improvement it has brought. Upon completing policy development on diversity, I congratulated Council on finally, after many years of off and on discussion, writing the first concrete policy on the topic. A voice to my right, that of a veteran Councillor, chimed in with, “No, that’s not quite true.” The comment took me by surprise. It turns out that Council *had* made some prior statements on this topic, but in over a year of discussion, nobody had once mentioned any. If policy had been created, I can’t imagine it wouldn’t have been written down, but where? If no one could easily point to the policy, it goes without saying that nobody had been following up over time to find out if the policy had actually produced results.

Under PG, the creation of new policy is promptly recorded and published in a single document. It is always there for everyone to see. If it is not in the policy document, it may be a lovely thought, a statement of principal, or anything else, but it isn't policy. Each policy is monitored no less than annually for progress and compliance, reviewed to ensure it is still up to the task for which it was written, and revised if not.

If you have entrusted the running of your organisation to the hands of a board, isn't that the way you want to see them guiding and shaping it for today and for tomorrow? (A purely rhetorical question.)

Council Transparency and Conflict of Interest

Equity is like many membership organisations in that the board (Council) is made up of people who are both owners (members) of the association, and also consumers of its services. In such a scenario, ensuring that Council decisions are free of individual preference and personal interest is a top priority. Although Council has long had a By-Law on conflict of interest, we recently introduced a much more detailed policy designed to enhance transparency of decision-making, and ensure that Council debate continues to represent the will and needs of all 5000 members, not just those of the people around the boardroom table that term.

Council Link and Monitoring Reports

Midway through the term, Council initiated a new communication vehicle to ensure members were kept up to speed on our work. Council Link provides detailed reports on major topics of discussion. Being separate from the *EQ* itself, it can be sized to fit the news we have to share and also lends itself to an online format for quick distribution, if needed.

As mentioned several times, Council is constantly measuring organisational performance against the policy we have written to shape it, and no aspect of this work goes unexamined over the course of a year. So that this process and its conclusions are accessible to the membership, all monitoring reports for at least a full cycle are posted in the members-only section of the website and are available in printed format upon request. We act for you, and transparency of our operations is important to us.

By-Laws

Council began a complete review of all By-Laws early in the term, and a recent Council Link provided information on the first wave of clean-up amendments. Our set of By-Laws is the "rules" document to which members most often turn when they have an organisational concern. Combined with the Constitution, it contains all of the important provisions for how Equity is run, including membership classes, rights and standards of conduct; the complaints and discipline process; creation and election of Council itself; and dues and initiation fees. Period updates are necessary to keep it current. The review is slated to finish in June, so that we have a clean document going forward into the new term. A full copy of the revised By-Laws will be circulated to the members in the fall.

Western Office Renewal

With the collision of a number of staff departures late last year, Equity suddenly found itself with an empty western office. Support for Alberta and B.C. was shifted to the national office while the Executive Director sought input on the best service options to be offering in those regions, prior to making new staffing decisions. Council moved quickly to implement policy setting the terms under which significant changes could be made to the western office. Council will debate an additional policy proposal to entirely remove decisions on the future of the western office from the purview of the Executive Director – a discussion to take place later this year.

National AGM and Member Resource sheets

Since 2006, Council has been exploring new ways to make the National AGM more accessible to members, and more meaningful. We began by holding alternate ones in a major centre other than Toronto, which has definitely allowed us to reach members more directly. In 2007, we recorded portions of the meeting and posted the video online, an effort met with limited positive response. We get it – watching a meeting on your computer is not *the* most engaging activity. So we moved on from that.

For the most recent AGM in Toronto, we had two speakers on topics we knew to be of interest to the members, and the results from one of the presentations will be circulated as a resource sheet, so that all members can benefit from that portion of the AGM. That should be out mid-summer, and we are looking at ways to build on the positive response we have received so far. We'd love to hear from you with any comments or suggestions you may have.

If you live in the Montreal area, our next AGM will be held there on Monday, October 5, and we look forward to seeing you.

In conclusion...

Council has accomplished a lot during this term, and the summary above doesn't really do justice to the enormous range of topics we have addressed and completed, nor those on which we are now poised to embark. Not detailed above are decisions on environmental awareness in staff and Council decision-making, changes to the job descriptions of both Vice Presidents, greater clarity in our employment arrangements with the Executive Director, annual Honours decisions, changes in handling long-term member arrears, and the simplification of election and nomination procedures.

There are still 4 more months left in this term, and a whole pile of important topics still on the agenda. Remember my tirelessly/unflinchingly comment above? Please consider this my commitment to continue aggressive progress on these topics through to our last meeting. As much as we have accomplished, there is still much to be done, and the current Council will hand off any unfinished business to the incoming Council in a manner that will allow them to hit the ground running.

Council needs excellent Councillors, and the membership needs, and deserves, an excellent Council. We'd like to think we have met that standard this term and invite you to be part of continuing that work for the coming one. If furthering the improvement of Equity sounds like the kind of thing you would be good at, please consider running for election in the fall. Nominations are now open, and details can be found in the most recent *EQ*.



Allan Teichman
President

On behalf of Alix, Annabel, Barry, Bill, David A., David R., Dawn, Hal, Kerry, Kerry Ann, Kim, Lara, Laurel, Marianne, Matt, Robert, Sandy, Sharon, Tania, Virginia and Wade