As John Sowagi takes over as director of Information Exchange, he reflects on what has come before him and where the department is going

In the nuclear industry, continuous improvement is a key operational principle. The CANDU Owners Group (COG), responsible for innovation and knowledge management for the industry through collaboration of its members, suppliers and partners, lives by this principle with the same vigor as its member organizations.

John Sowagi, who headed up COG’s Knowledge Management program, was recently handed the reins on the Information Exchange line of business after Don Wilson retired this spring. And so, in the spirit of continuous improvement, he set out to assess the status of his new department to determine where to focus his team’s efforts.

Information Exchange is the area of COG responsible for helping members share information and operating experience to better understand what information already exists and how to use it effectively in daily operations and problem solving. As well, IE works to build up new sources of information through collaborative peer groups and workshops where members can pool their expertise and knowledge to devise innovation solutions and create new opportunities for improvement.

As Sowagi began to dig into his new job, he says he realized his role was going to be to further grow the strong momentum that was already building within IE.

“I’ve been passed a baton and I think it’s a golden baton,” says Sowagi. “COG is recognized beyond Canada for the strength of this program; what I see as my role going forward is really helping to strengthen something that is already a strength for Canada and for all of the CANDU members.”

Sowagi says there are three things in
particular that he sees strengths in the program to build on.

“We’re really proud that the amount of OPEX we’re sharing is getting more traction. There is a lot of collaboration: lessons are being learned across the utilities from each other and it helps us proactively avoid events as an industry,” he says. “It is nice when we don’t always have to learn things the hard way and can learn from each other, instead.”

The second area of strength is the Q&A program, where members can send out a question to be answered by the broader COG community.

“We have really increased the engagement in the questions and answers program,” he says. “We do a really good job in helping utilities sort out problems as they come up and we’ve really grown in that area.”

Sowagi says a legacy of Wilson’s time as IE director (and the third thing that really comes to mind for him) is the improvement in the strength of the COG team structure that is used by the peer groups, working groups and task teams.

“This is where so much collaboration happens amongst the members and our supplier participants, too. We’ve really set ourselves up to grow in these areas, we have become more outcome focused. That is a direct result of Don’s vision.”

Going forward, he says, the peer groups are looking to add metrics that demonstrate the value member organizations receive and how the peer group work relates back directly to the plant needs.

So, what’s next?

“I see continued development on COG’s strategic initiatives that fall in the IE area,” says Sowagi. Initiatives that come to mind, include:

• CCIV: The Continuous Collaborative Improvement Visit initiative brings expert cross-industry teams together to solve specific problems at a plant;
• A capture of refurbishment lessons learned;
• Further development of the value proposition for COG’s supplier participants;
• Completion of a new OPEX system scheduled to roll out in early summer; and
• Further EPRI collaboration and enhancement.

At the same time, Sowagi retains leadership of the Knowledge Management group, which will integrate into the IE fold. However, he says the group is getting a name change to better reflect its role and COG’s role, holistically.

“It was a bit of a misnomer to have a group called Knowledge Management because...
everything we do at COG is related to managing knowledge, across all the lines of business,” says Sowagi. And so, the group will now be known as Learning and Development to reflect the strong training affiliation. Sowagi says whatever the name is, it is on a tremendous growth trajectory.

The people part of nuclear
It is often said that nuclear is a people business and Sowagi says that in IE, the people really are the greatest strength.

“IE has really strong people with a strong experience base in the areas they represent: maintenance, training, chemistry, engineering: these are all core to the peer groups,” he says.

“When I was asked to take on this role, I was not hesitant because I knew I had a good group of people with a good experience base; I can learn from them. They are all passionate about what they do, and I can contribute by forming the vision to enhance where we already are today.”

Pictured below: COG’s Information Exchange Director John Sowagi is a familiar face in classrooms, worldwide, teaching COG leadership and management skills to nuclear leaders.

New name for Knowledge Management group...
Learning and Development moniker reflects the specific outcomes of this COG program area

The COG Knowledge Management group has recently changed its name to Learning and Development (L&D) to reflect the direct connection to training and education of nuclear professionals.

Whereas COG holistically serves a knowledge management role through research, development, joint projects, information exchange, as well as learning and development; L&D is focussed specifically on ensuring a strong pipeline of competent leadership and management expertise exists within the industry, even as demographics change.

The L&D group may be best known for the well-received Nuclear Professional Development Seminars, a series of three-week intensive leadership training offered both in Canada and various countries internationally. As well, L&D offers course in specific areas such as safety culture, supervisor training, maintenance management and other specific core nuclear management competencies.

Most recently, in late April, Learning and Development facilitated its first Front Line Supplier Participant training, which will be offered four times a year to groups of participants from the 26 COG supplier participants. It is also open to members of the Organization of Canadian Nuclear Industries (OCNI).

COG is currently working with the University Network of Excellence in Nuclear Engineering (UNENE) to offer a Masters in Nuclear Technology Management, endorsed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as well as a two-week Nuclear Energy Management School, also in collaboration with UNENE, the IAEA as well as Ontario Tech University.