

The granting of a Royal Charter: an anachronism or a major development for ergonomics and human factors?

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1. Background

Ergonomics and human factors (EHF) has come a long way since the discipline and profession first started to become organised and coalesce with the forming of the Ergonomics Research Society in the UK in 1949, the Human Factors Society of America in 1957 and the founding of the International Ergonomics Association in 1959. Various authors have mapped this history, for example Edholm and Murrell (1973), Waterson and Sell (2006), Waterson and Eason (2009), Waterson (2011) in the UK; Chapanis (1999), Meister (1995, 1996, 1999) in USA, and IEA (2006) and Waterson et al (2012) for the IEA.

In the UK, the Ergonomics Society, latterly the Institute of Ergonomics and Human Factors, has long harboured the desire to become Chartered, putting it in the same position as other long established, respected professions, for example accountants, architects, civil engineers, electrical engineers, nurses, veterinary surgeons, to name but a few.

It has been a long journey but in May 2014, we received the news that at a meeting of the Privy Council held at Buckingham Palace, Her Majesty The Queen had approved an Order granting a Charter to the Institute (Privy Council, 2014). In pursuit of this goal, much work had to be done lobbying government departments whose support would be crucial to the success of the petition. The Institute also needed to ensure there would be no objection from cognate societies with whom our interests intersect. It was also a mammoth task to prepare the Charter and Byelaws, the governance documents under which the Chartered Institute would operate and which the Privy Council and Charity Commission needed to approve.

2. The nature of Chartership

So what actually is a Royal Charter? Chartership is a historic form of incorporation, i.e. establishing an organisation as a legal entity, the earliest being granted to Cambridge and Oxford Universities in the 13th century. The Privy Council explain:

"...the grant of new Charters is rare. New grants of Royal Charters are these days reserved for eminent professional bodies or charities which have a solid record of achievement and are financially sound. In the case of professional bodies they should represent a field of activity which is unique and not covered by other professional bodies. At least 75% of the corporate members should be qualified to first degree level standard. Finally, both in the case of charities and professional bodies, incorporation by Charter should be in the public interest."

Chartership is very much an early 'English' convention, reflected in the language in which the Charter is worded, figure 1. For the Institute, however, it is endorsement from high authority of our collective importance and professionalism. With this, the Institute joins other previously Chartered cognate bodies including the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (granted 1920), British Psychological Society (1965), British Computer Society (1984), Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (2002) and British Occupational Hygiene Society (2012).

3. The international benefit

Although the implied royal benevolence, the petition process and the charter language may appear to some to be an anachronism, the recognition conferred on EHF in the UK through the Institute becoming Chartered should also be of significant international benefit. It is argued that this development in the UK forms a

beneficial plank in developing the 'value proposition' for EHF, argued for by Dul et al (2012). This conference presentation places the award of the Royal Charter in historical context, discusses what it means for EHF and how it sits with Dul et al's strategic actions for developing the discipline and profession internationally.

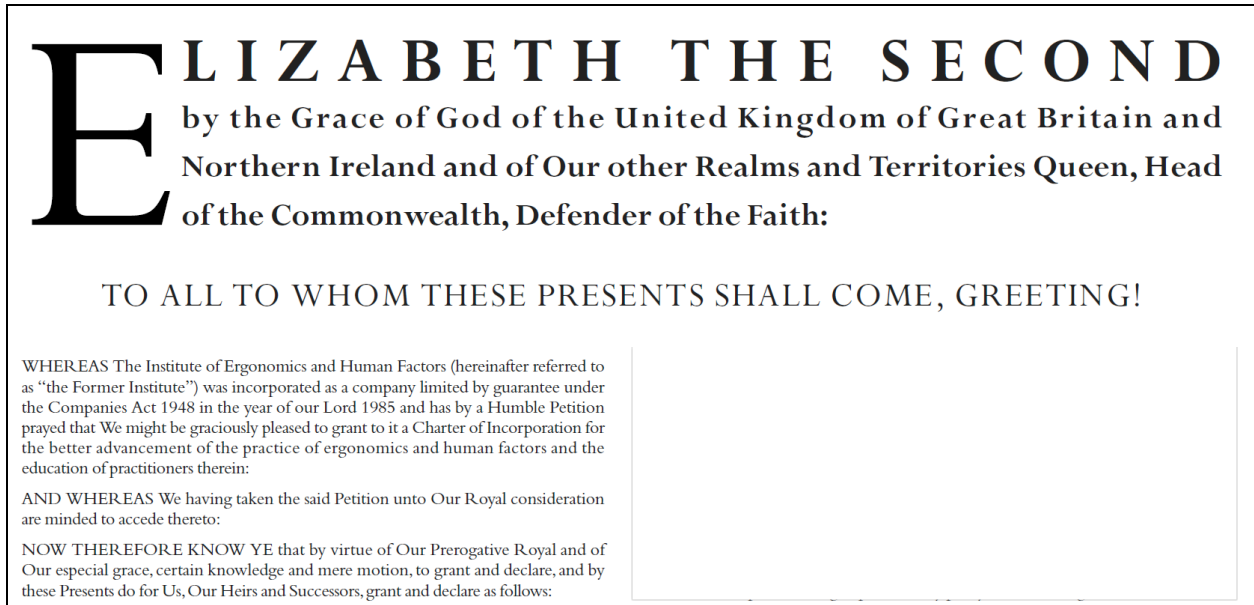


Figure 1. Preamble of Royal Charter granted to the Institute

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