My name is Phil Senn and I have been working in the building services industry for over 10 years. I started out in energy efficiency advisory and have since moved into a client-side role. I have been with my current employer Charter Hall for four years in the roles of Technical Services Manager – Office and more recently Sustainability & Operations Manager – Industrial. Charter Hall has $23B in funds under management in Australia, so the opportunities to influence change have a lot of scale.

I have a somewhat embarrassing story about my journey onto the NSW Committee. After joining as a CIBSE Graduate I found out there was a vacancy for the NSW Chair position. After naively asking my friend and mentor Steve Hennessy if I should apply, he gently suggested I first join the NSW Committee and go from there. Happily, I got the opportunity to take on the role a few years later after Paul Angus took over as CIBSE ANZ Regional Chair in 2017. This continues to be a challenging and enriching experience.

What inspired you to want to become a building services engineer and pursue a career in engineering?

Although my father and cousin are both mechanical engineers, I haven’t met anybody that made a conscious decision to become a building services engineer during their undergraduate studies. As most do, I fell into the industry, after being offered a role with a boutique energy efficiency advisory firm. I had just completed a thesis on ocean wave renewable energy, which in turn was inspired by a desire to do something that mattered globally – climate change had popped up on my radar during university.

What qualification path did you choose and why?

I started studying for a Bachelor of Mechatronic Engineering but found it

“ The wealth of information available through the portal gave me a shortcut to industry leading information on pretty much any building services topic I came across.”
a bit too digitally heavy and ultimately completed a Bachelor of Mechanical Engineering at the University of Sydney to keep my options open. After about two years working full time, I started a Master of Design Science in Building Services – arguably the closest thing on offer in Australia to a building services degree. In between those two, I also completed a Diploma in Energy Studies through Murdoch University in WA, as they had a great online course.

I’m on the lifelong learning train and CIBSE is one of the means to help me stay on track.

What do you consider to be the main benefits of Graduate membership? And why?

It’s a highly cost-effective way to enter the CIBSE environment (unless you’re still studying full time in which case it’s free!). I believed it was a good thing to have on my CV for more technical roles. Upon first joining, my focus was to unlock the CIBSE Knowledge Portal. Working for a small company meant I had limited resources to senior technical people and documentation. The wealth of information available through the portal gave me a shortcut to industry leading information on pretty much any building services topic I came across. The benefits of networking with peers have been invaluable both personally and professionally.

Why are you looking to become IEng/CEngr?

I respect the time, effort and excellence needed to become IEng/CEngr. In my current role working for an owner and manager of commercial property; we work with tenants, investors, designers, engineering consultants and contractors to achieve our aims. Nonetheless, with Australia’s gradual movement toward required engineering registration in each state, I see it as a way of future proofing my career, despite not being a practising engineer.

More mundanely, I think it’s well past due for me to progress past my Graduate status, particularly given my activity on the NSW and ANZ Committees.

Why do you think becoming professionally registered is important/beneficial?

A downside of the internet age is that we are heading into a mistrust of experts – think about the raft of unqualified voices that point to obscure and non-peer reviewed articles to contest findings of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) reports – and we need to reverse this trend. After all, you want an expert pilot to take you on holiday and the best possible doctor when you need treatment – they all have strict qualification pathways to demonstrate their competence. In the engineering space, an ever-increasing regulatory framework and suite of technological solutions means that you need to balance specialisation with an ability to understand specialisation holistically.

What is your greatest professional accomplishment to date and what do you hope to achieve in the future?

I couldn’t put my finger on any one thing, and ultimately you never achieve anything in a vacuum – you do it with the support of your colleagues and professional networks. Having said that, working as part of an Independent Commissioning Agent (ICA) team on several large new buildings, being part of the NABERS programme as a Supervisor and Trainer, and most recently working with a highly talented design and building team on a multimillion-dollar upgrade of Charter Hall’s head office lobby are all standouts. What I have most enjoyed is the journey to get where I am today, with an ever-increasing circle of responsibility, relationships and increasing knowledge base.

I’m on the lifelong learning train and CIBSE is one of the means to help me stay on track. I tend not to think too far down the line of where I want to be beyond the next few years, as we’re living in such a dynamic environment. Provided I can continue to contribute meaningfully to society and to do so in the company of like-minded people I will always be happy.