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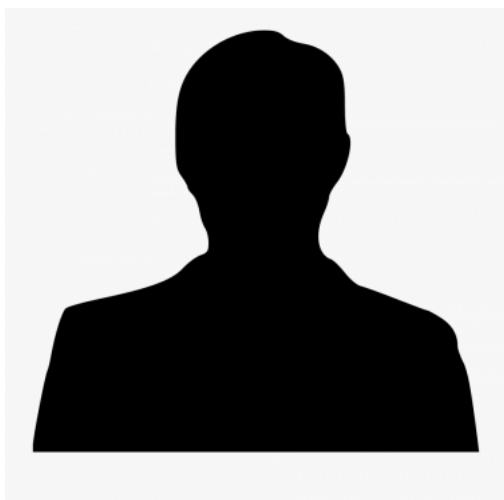


Invisible Man Johnson still at ACS Featured

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Andrew Johnson - The Invisible Man

Andrew Johnson is still CEO of the Australian Computer Society, six weeks after he was asked to resign.

His abrupt departure was only temporary. He announced he was leaving on LinkedIn and changed his profile, but now he is back as CEO, on LinkedIn and in person, after a short 'holiday'.

The circumstances of his departure were never announced by ACS. iTWire understands from sources within the organisation that new President Ian Oppermann demanded his resignation, but that he was asked to return by the ACS Management Committee, where he has many allies.

There is now something of a Mexican stand-off within the organisation. As one senior ACS member told iTWire "Oppermann can't fire Johnson, and the Management Committee can't fire Oppermann."

ACS has been in turmoil since it lost a court case brought against it last December, in which the judge overturned the results of the vote in October 2019 to change the organisation from a membership-based society to a Company Limited By Guarantee.

The judge roundly criticised Johnson, Company Secretary Andrew Madry and then President Yohan Ramasundara for irregularities in the calling and conduct of the meeting and the vote on the structural changes. The judge found that they had stacked the meeting with supporters by not publicising it correctly, and then invalidated an opponent's vote on a technicality when the result threatened to go against them. Ramasundara was personally responsible for the conduct of the meeting and the vote, and was roundly criticised by the judge.

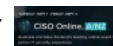
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ACS was ordered to pay the costs of the group of members who had taken them to court, and also had to pay its own substantial legal fees. The total cost to the ACS was over half a million dollars, though it has refused to disclose the exact amount.

Despite the extremely adverse ruling nobody has ever been held to account. Madry left in February, but Johnson and Ramasundara – who holds the powerful position of Immediate Past President – are still there. The growing 'Rescue Our ACS' group which grew out of the members who brought the court case is demanding their removal, and a more transparent and speedier process of change.

The well-respected Oppermann was elected President in March, promising to reconcile the two factions, but more than five months later little has happened. Oppermann points to the difficulties of changing the organisation's rules, but many senior figures inside the organisation believe he is involved in a power struggle with the Management Committee, many members of which are resisting his reform attempts.

The Rescue Our ACS group thought it had a victory in July, when Johnson abruptly resigned. Now he is back. The ACS refuses to discuss the circumstances of his leaving or his return. When iTWire requested an interview to discuss the matter, Oppermann said he was in an 'interesting place' and needed more time before he could speak publicly.

Sources within ACS say that there appears to be no plans to replace Johnson. After he resigned there was talk of engaging a recruitment consultant to conduct an international search, but nothing more has been heard. CFO Kim Finch was quietly announced as acting CEO, but she seems to be taking direction from Johnson and is not regarded as a successor.

iTWire has attempted to piece together the chain of events by talking to people with some familiarity with what is happening. No one we have spoken to has the full picture. It is like a jigsaw with many of the pieces missing.

It appears that Oppermann demanded Johnson's immediate resignation, that Johnson left, but that the Management Committee ruled that Oppermann did not have the power to dismiss Johnson. Now he has quietly returned, his power base within the Management Committee intact.

Johnson's behaviour since he returned is not that of a man about to leave the organisation and arrange an orderly succession, but one of a man intent on staying in office. Our sources say he is talking to others about his long-term role.

We cannot be certain. Nobody is talking on the record. There has been no information out of ACS on the matter. Both Oppermann and Johnson have refused iTWire's requests for an interview, and ignored written questions sent to them.

But Oppermann did write an article for the ACS publication Information Age on 19 August, which outlined a plan and a timetable for governance change in ACS, a process many people in the organisation, and especially the Rescue Our ACS group, have been calling for.

The plan calls for a twelve month process of changing the ACS rules to allow online voting, a process of consultation with members on a constitution, and a new vote on becoming a Company Limited By Guarantee.

The article ironically ends 'ACS looks forward to receiving feedback from its members', something that has been demonstrably lacking to date.

The plans to change the Constitution in 2019 were widely discussed by the ACS Congress and the Branch Executive Committees, but very little came from ordinary members because they had few opportunities to be involved. Because of poor communication many had no idea any changes are being considered. In any case, any feedback was largely ignored, as is happening again now.

Roger Clarke is leader of the save our ACS group. He attempted to stand against Oppermann on a reform ticket at the election for the presidency in March, but his candidacy was rejected by the Management Committee on a technicality. He has repeatedly expressed his frustrations with the slow pace of change.

He was asked to put the group's case at the ACS Congress on 16 June. "A great deal was discussed at that meeting," he told iTWire. "Months later comes this very meagre and seriously inadequate statement."

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Tensions are at boiling point. iTWire, as the only publication closely following the saga, has been approached by many senior ACS members aghast at what is happening. The organisation is bleeding members and is propped up by fees from its monopoly of accreditation of overseas IT practitioners, who are called 'members' in the bloated figures the Society quotes., but who have no voting rights.

Professional membership has almost halved over the last decade. The Rescue Our ACS group is justifiably concerned about the current procedural problems. They are concerned with the prospect of an inappropriate constitution being bluffed through because opponents of the proposal are not permitted to communicate with the membership.

They are also very concerned about the decline in professional membership. This has arisen because so many members, many of them senior industry figures, have left because of the Management Committee's attempt to change ACS from a society of computer professionals – with a strong focus on member services – to a commercial organisation that has little interest in members and no need to serve them.

Even that strategy may be in danger of failing. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to severely affect revenue from the ACS's monopolistic international accreditation program. The current financial year is likely to be a bad one for the organisation, calling into question the rationale for the organisation's shift in emphasis.

"In the rush to make money, the society's original aims have been lost," said Roger Clarke.

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