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Johnson resigns as ACS CEO Featured

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Andrew Johnson changed the ACS

Australian Computer Society CEO Andrew Johnson has resigned. The unexpected move follows months of turmoil in the organisation and may clear the path for the reforms that many have demanded.

Johnson has been CEO for six years. He spent three years before that as Chief Operations Officer and as Head of Strategic Initiatives. He has been an important force in changing the nature of the organisation from a largely member based professional society to a commercial organisation.

The transformation has been commercially successful. The ACS is awash with cash and has successfully expanded into a number of commercial ventures. But many are unhappy with the new direction and an active and vocal dissident group has emerged to challenge the organisation's strategy and philosophy.

Johnson's resignation has led to much speculation as to the reasons why he would leave now.

On 23 December 2019 a damning judgement against him and his management team was handed down in a court case brought by Dr Roger Clarke, leader of the dissident group. The judgement annulled the result of a vote at an Extraordinary General Meeting in October 2019 to convert the ACS from a professional society to a Company Limited by Guarantee.

The judge found that the vote was invalid because of a number of irregularities, and that the meeting itself was not constitutional because many members had not been properly informed of it, effectively disenfranchising them.

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Johnson issued a weak public apology in January, couched in the passive voice that deflected responsibility from any individual. He has been otherwise unrepentant. In the face of constant calls for him to step down he consistently said he had no intention of resigning.

No mention of any of these matters in Andrew Johnson's public rationale for his resignation. In a statement on his LinkedIn page, he talked of 'time to pass the baton', praising the ACS's performance over the last financial year and the organisation's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are many messages of support for him on his LinkedIn page, praising his leadership and his vision in transforming the organisation during his tenure as CEO. Under his leadership the ACS's revenues and profitability have increased substantially. He has many supporters, who regret his decision to leave.

If indeed it was his decision, Many have speculated that he has been forced out, or at the very least has decided to go before things get difficult.

The organisation's financial success has come at what many believe to be too high a cost. The strong financial results in recent years have occurred on top of a severe decline in the number of professional members of the ACS.

Internal figures seen by iTWire, and not denied by ACS, show that in December 2013, a little over a year before Johnson became CEO, the organisation had 10,689 professional members. By October 2019 this number had declined by more than half, to 4756.

There are also 5346 associate members, people working in the industry but who do not have professional qualifications in computing. This number has declined even more severely, down from 17,712 December 2013.

ACS consistently quotes its number of members as over 45,000. But just over 35, 000 of these members are non-voting, most of them members in name only because of their participation in the Overseas Skills Preparation Program, an international accreditation scheme of which the ACS has a government granted monopoly.

There are also 7213 'Professional Year' members and 1457 Student Members, none of whom have voting rights. The Professional Year members are mostly recent migrants who are granted provisional accreditation and provisional non-voting membership ifor their first year in Australia. Most do not renew after their compulsory first 12 months.

The massive increase in the number of nonprofessional members, all of whom pay substantial fees, has been the main reason for the ACS's financial success in recent years. Many believe they should not be counted as members, that a business model based on fees from accreditation is unsustainable, and that the severe decline in professional membership is an indication that ACS is not fulfilling its obligation to serve the interests of Australia's computing professionals.

Johnson mentioned strong preliminary numbers from the recently finished financial year in his LinkedIn post, but there is some concern over whether they will last.

One senior ACS figure, who declined to be named, told iTWire that the COVID-19 pandemic will greatly reduce the number of nonprofessional members and therefore severely impact the organisation's revenue stream. "Johnson is getting out now before the numbers turn bad," he said.

Dr Roger Clarke, leader of the Rescue Your ACS dissident group, issued a statement after Johnson's resignation: So did Professor Ashley Goldsworthy, another member of the group. Professor Goldsworthy, a particularly virulent critic, is the only person to have been both President and CEO of the ACS. iTWire has published their statements here (/it-industry/more-heads-should-roll,-say-clarke-and-goldsworthy.html). Both believe other members of the Management Committee should also resign.

iTWire has sought reaction to Andrew Johnson's resignation, or further details as to why he is leaving, from a number of senior ACS figures, including President Ian Oppermann, but none were able to reply before our rather tight deadline.

We will report on any further developments.

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