



“Get Up Early, Work Hard, Find Oil”

J. Paul Getty, the great American oil tycoon, instructed his petroleum engineers to, “Get up early, work hard, find oil.” It was a clear, direct and achievable mission statement that defined the purpose and exploited the distinctive competence of his company. As an MBA student I was introduced to the phrase “distinctive competence,” which is a business school maxim that is used to describe the unique purpose or competencies of an organization. This business maxim is intended to be a strategic consideration that guides an organization through the high and low periods of our economic cycles. Unfortunately, prior to this latest economic slump, many organizations (including numerous professional societies) got caught straying from their distinctive competencies, and some are now paying a big price for these frequently worthy but often-precarious deviations.

Essentially, the distinctive competencies are the products and services that directly satisfy the mission and core objectives of an organization. It is what an organization does uniquely well to satisfy their mission or purpose, and in Getty’s case it was to find oil. In the Society’s case, our “oil” is to continually find ways to advance solid-state and electrochemical science and technology through worldwide dissemination of knowledge in these fields. Our distinctive competencies are: (1) technical journals and books, (2) technical meetings and courses, and (3) a membership benefits package that basically enables the distribution of and participation in the first two competencies.

It seems pretty simple, but in the (high) times of easy money it is tempting to (digress) expand into new and costly ventures. Board members of a nonprofit professional society could even argue that it is their responsibility to use this newly found money to support their members and their science in even greater ways. But the business maxim suggests that you should stay close to your distinctive competencies because it can be perilous to the health of the organization, and often ineffective to venture into areas that are not consistent with your core objectives. Through “thick ‘n thin” ECS has not ventured far from its distinctive competence. We have just kept looking for oil, and we have even hit a few

gushers. Our focus can be attributed to many things, including a strong leadership, a directed governance structure, and a culture that is connected and committed to the mission. This commitment has prevented us from being seduced by the success in the “high times,” and kept us searching for oil.

Perhaps the single most significant reason we have not strayed is because we expend so much energy on improving the programs and services that we do uniquely well. ECS has stayed true to its distinctive competence and that has served us well in these challenging times. We are the best publisher and educator (technical meetings) of electrochemical and solid-state science in the world, and despite the value of our other endeavors, everything else is subsidiary. The publications and meetings are the competencies we use to disseminate information in order to advance the science and satisfy our mission. This is not to say we have been adverse to change, quite the contrary. If you look back at the pages of this magazine, you will find a continuing story about the evolutionary changes to ECS, which have been necessary to serve the professionals in our increasingly diverse scientific areas. These inevitable changes to our programs have directly supported and advanced the distinctive competence of ECS.

It is important to have a mission that is worthy, relevant, and obtainable, and the ECS mission is certainly all of those things. It is also important to set objectives that satisfy the mission, and I think we are covered there too. Finally, a valuable and focused distinctive competence will lead to the continued success of ECS. Find oil...we have. Find more oil...we will. ■

Roque J. Calvo
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