

FREE RADICALS

Let me be among the first to wish you a happy new millennium. Yep. Less than 10 months from now it will be 2001, a new millennium. Come on now, Arthur Clarke didn't call his book and movie 2000, did he? Now that we settled this semantic issue, it is time for another installment of "Free Radicals." This time it is about professional societies: do we need them?

So... why should you be a member of ECS or any other professional society? After all, you can go to all the meetings, get the *Journal* and do other things without being a member. Sure, it costs more, but you can still do it. So, why belong?

Well, let's duck that question for the time being. Rather, let's ask, "Do we need professional societies at all?" I claim that the answer is a resounding yes.

Here's why.

First, without professional societies, we would have to publish our research in for-profit technical journals. The profit incentive can and does contaminate and compromise the legitimacy of the peer review process. (Sure, we can post our non-peer reviewed research on our web sites. But I, for one, would not want to take medicine or have a new surgical procedure that had not been peer reviewed by an elected-member professional society, *i.e.* the AMA.) So, chalk one up for volunteer professional societies — they provide the validation seal of approval of published research. But... maybe real progress in science and engineering could survive in a world of publication in only for-profit journals. So, Woodall, you aren't compelling yet.

But now comes my ace-in-the-hole.

Professional societies have conferences and meetings. To my mind, this feature is the clincher that justifies professional societies. First, it is a format where you can present research that has not yet been critically reviewed, and get feedback to help you decide if your research

plans are valid and on track. Next, we all know that not everyone is in meeting rooms all the time listening to one paper after the next. Instead, the hallways and empty rooms of the hotel conference facilities are filled with attendees, and not just during the coffee breaks. In fact the "better" or more prestigious the conference, the more attendees in the hallways.

Now, one might ask, "Why is anyone in the meeting rooms listening to talks?" Good question. In fact, my crystal ball says, professional societies must move to asynchronous transmission of conference talks. Yes, you heard me. In the future all verbal presentations at conferences must be available to registrants as either live, real time, or later as on-demand video and audio presentations, either in the hotel bedroom or later in the office, and at least as "talking head" oral presentations with stills of the graphics, until the available and cost effective bandwidth enables total video and audio.

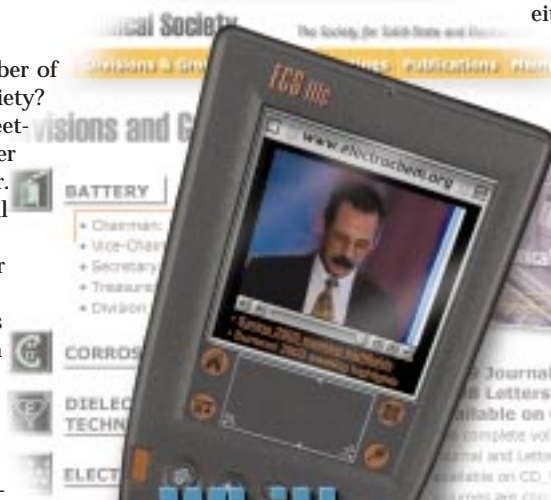
Just think of it — no more guilt feelings about "missing" a talk. You can skip an important talk to do some networking and still "see and hear" the talk later. Now that would be a compelling reason to maintain the professional society structure.

If you are still not fully convinced of the need, we now invoke those benefits exclusive to members. The major one in my mind are the fellow programs. Election to "Fellow" of major societies is important professional recognition for continued professional career advancement, especially for professors and members of technical staff at major corporate research laboratories. It is usually either a prelude to or a follow on of a major society award, another career-enhancing symbol of accomplishment. Also, membership leads to committee appointments, which in turn facilitate networking with professionally advanced colleagues who can have a positive impact on your career advancement.

Enough? Do we need professional societies?

Okay, let's return to the ducked question head on: "Why do you need to belong?" Because if there are no members there are no professional societies.

See you next time. ■



Whither Professional Societies?

by Jerry Woodall

Why is this? Because, these folks are "networking," and this is the most important part of professional societies and professional society meetings — networking. We really don't go to meetings mainly to listen to talks or even invited talks. We can find out about those later, by reading extended abstracts, or by phone calls and e-mails to the authors, or by waiting for the publication that usually follows. We give and listen to talks so that some organization will pay for us to attend the conference in the first place! But when we get there, we seek out our colleagues and gurus to get our professional bearings! Are we still in the right field? Is our research plan worthwhile? Should we look for a new job? And on and on as it overflows into the bars and restaurants.