

Competitive Alternatives to Professional Conferences

At the end of June I attended the ESRI International User Conference which took place in San Diego, California (see also page 67). The number of attendees approached a five-digit figure. Indeed, approximately 10,000 individuals participated in the conference! Quite a difference when compared to conferences run by many professional



associations! (For notational convenience the term conference is used also throughout as a substitute for congress, symposium, and workshop.)

One evening, when the Californian sun was still pleasantly warm, I walked along the Bay of San Diego and the following question arose in my mind. Why is it that so many geo-spatial user conferences are gaining increasing popularity, while meetings organised by the traditional, professional associations seem

rapidly to be losing their attraction for many practitioners? Is it because a general disintegration is occurring within society, with a concomitant replacement of the successful associations of the past by commercially-orientated alternatives able to adapt quickly to the changing needs of target groups? Is it because the international professional associations have a rather rigid, archaic, hierarchical structure, being as they are subdivided into international and national committees headed by boards of presidents, directors and chairmen for whom these honorary positions are to some extent awards for lifelong devotion to the profession? Is it because there are so many geo-spatial conferences organised that no week can pass without one such event, as Larry Fritz noted in the July issue of this journal?

Two Levels of Foundation

In my opinion, the above issues do not represent the actual causes of declining professional conference participation figures. The actual reason is much more complex. To bring this into focus, let us first face a fundamental question: what is the existential ground for any professional association? The answer to this question is straightforward: the ground is twofold. At the first level, an association creates the conditions for an efficient and continual transfer of knowledge among its members and provides facilities to improve skills. I call this the level of internal communication. The second level is concerned with promoting external communication, for example with other, related organisations, with governmental agencies and with society as a whole. The aim of external communication is to augment the status of the profession, to achieve and to safeguard privileges, to promote the profession and to protect the interests of all members.

Journals, Conferences and the Internet

Traditionally, two media were available for purposes of internal communication: journals and conferences. Once

upon a time these two instruments were very fruitful and mighty. They contributed much to the success of many professional association in the past. However, today the Internet is establishing itself as a serious competitor to these media when it comes to knowledge transfer. In addition, impressive technological developments are resulting in an increasing diffusion of boundaries between traditional professions. As a consequence, professional profiles are evaporating. The needs of society and the behaviour of its citizens have also changed dramatically. One no longer needs to rely on an organisation to look out for one's interests and to further personal knowledge.

Diffusing Boundaries

The problems of today differ completely from those faced by the practitioner of a decade or two ago. The present day practitioner gets confronted with a broad spectrum of problems. It is demanded of him that client services be improved, operational costs reduced, the efficiency of workflows improved; that the latest ICT technology be incorporated on the work floor, that workers get acquainted with ICT, that mis-performance liability be reduced and work processes standardised. Many of these problems are of a new type and magnitude and are interdisciplinary in nature. However, professional associations remain as they have always been: scientifically and technologically-orientated. This whilst practitioners need solutions far exceeding technological issues. They thus increasingly search for alternative media.

Publish or Perish

There is an additional disruptive influence: the publish or perish syndrome. Let me explain. The product of any research activity consists principally in knowledge. Knowledge is per definition invisible and untouchable. To communicate their work, researchers write articles. Publications are considered by the boards of many research institutes as constituting the actual product of research. Researchers frequently use conferences as convenient publication routes. This results in practitioner delegates being increasingly confronted with embryonic concepts and preliminary results. They become estranged from the roots of their own association and develop a growing reluctance to attend these professional conferences. Why should they? The alternatives are so many and easy to find!

Inappropriate Blueprints

Since professional conferences seem to narrow down to meetings of researchers and manufacturers, the majority of practitioners tend to resort to other media. Professional associations, if they are to justify their existence, have to rethink the way they interact with their members. The straightforward issuing and exercise of blueprints, which proved so successful in the past, is by no means sufficient anymore to satisfy the needs of today's practitioners.

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