



## Value and Benefit

It was a snowy late October day when I checked into a hotel in New York City. I was told that such an early snowfall was extremely rare; the last time snow fell in October in New York was more than 100 years ago. I was here for a performance at Carnegie Hall. The last time I saw Carnegie Hall was in 1988, and I stayed in the same hotel! I still remember the concierge taking me to my room (it was a must, although I said no thanks), and his waiting for a tip. As a poor student then, all I had was a US\$100 bill for all of my expenses. I embarrassingly asked for US\$99 change...

In the spring of 1988, when I checked into this hotel, it was the site of that year's International Conference on Acoustics, Speech, and Signal Processing (ICASSP). It was my first ICASSP! I could only admire Carnegie Hall from the outside, as I could not afford to enter. I also attended ICASSP with admiration, but I was an inside attendee who would present a poster for my first paper. Ever since, I have come back to ICASSP year after year, for I found a home where I could grow professionally.

Why did I keep coming back to ICASSP every year, but not to Carnegie Hall until 23 years later? I found a community of people in ICASSP who love and engage in the science and technology that I practice. Most importantly, I could put faces to the names in science and build a social network around the technology. I became a part of the community! Carnegie Hall is great, but I never found such a connection with its people or art.

In fact, I joined the IEEE Signal Processing Society (SPS) in 1986. The sole motivation then was to obtain my own

copy of *IEEE Signal Processing Magazine* and *IEEE Transactions on Acoustics, Speech, and Signal Processing* without the need to go to the library to make ugly photocopies. Many like me also joined back then, leading to SPS's peak membership in 1997 with about 23,000 members.

IEEE *Xplore* was introduced soon after. More and more publications and proceedings became easily accessible in an e-version via the Internet. It was a major paradigm shift in that as long as one was affiliated with a university, institution, or company that licenses IEEE *Xplore*, there was no need or incentive to join IEEE or a Society; the dissemination of knowledge was just a few clicks within reach.

From then on, we saw a steady decline, IEEE-wide, in Society membership. Many no longer saw the value and benefit of joining IEEE, or any Society for that matter, since they could already access the dissemination of technology development. So why bother to pay out of one's pocket to join a Society?

Like many, I also discontinued the subscriptions of print copies. On my bookshelf, the print transactions sadly stopped in 2005. But I stayed on as a member. Why? It is not because I am overpaid and have funds to waste, nor am I so charitable as to donate to IEEE. It was because I found in SPS (and IEEE) a home where I can put faces to names on papers, build social networks, grow professionally; it is a place in which I eventually took on a leadership role in hopes of making contributions and having a positive impact on the community. SPS and IEEE are places that are a part of me, and it is impossible for me to imagine no longer associating with them.

What am I so attached to? In a nutshell, it is the value and benefit of membership. When IEEE *Xplore* arrived, some

traditional value and benefit disappeared, and so did some members. Therefore, to continue to build the community, the key is to ask what true value and benefit can we offer to attract and retain members?

Given the multifaceted dimensions of our membership, the answer is also multidimensional. As a Society, we have been addressing this issue from the traditional approaches of publications, conferences/workshops, and technical committees. In our newly created Membership Board, we also plan to offer better services and programs such as an online tutorial/education program, summer school, regional conferences, etc. We just created a position called director of student services to better serve student members. In short, we need programs of variety to suit the needs of our members and multiple ladders for them to climb!

All of the initiatives mentioned above and many more underway are the fruitful creation of the long-term strategic planning meeting, an event during ICIP 2010 in Hong Kong attended by SPS volunteer leaders from every corner of our community. We have been realizing many action items out of the strategic meeting and are committed to creating more value and benefit to meet the needs of our members. We understand that only with that commitment can we keep SPS strong and healthy. And we are growing and ready to grow even more, and in many ways.

Will you join me at ICASSP in Kyoto, 25–30 March during the beautiful cherry blossom season? If you have been to ICASSP, I welcome you home! If this is your first time, also welcome home!