

VOLUNTEERISM IN IEM

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"Tempting as it may sound to the idealists out there, saving the world is a rather tall order. That does not mean that society only reacts to substantial amounts of money, or that individuals are powerless to effect change. Just as it is unreasonable to expect to create a worldwide utopia, we must release ourselves from the shackles of the myth that one dedicated person alone cannot make a difference. To cure the planet's ills, we must first answer the calls for help in our own communities." – Ella Marin

The Expert Group Meeting on Volunteering and Social Development (The UN Volunteers, 1991) cited three defining characteristics of volunteering:

- i) the activity should not be undertaken primarily for financial reward;
- ii) the activity should be according to an individual's own free will; and
- iii) the activity should be of benefit to someone other than the volunteer, or to the society at large.

Viewed from these contexts, it is obvious that serving in IEM is indeed a volunteering activity as there is no financial gain to be gotten (save for honorarium payments and cost reimbursements), there is no

coercion (but only friendly persuasion), and it is beneficial to the membership at large and the engineering community in general through participation in the various activities that IEM organises.

The continuing functioning of a non-profit organisation hinges on the vitality of the volunteers who serve it. IEM is no exception. From that momentous day in 1959 till now, IEM has been blessed by a corps of engineer volunteers. From the council members in the highest decision making body of the Institution to the engineers who help organise a wide variety of member activities, these volunteers have been exemplary in providing the freely-chosen gift of time to the engineering community.

There are presently eight standing committees and fifteen

technical divisions plus the G&S Section in IEM. Taking a crude estimate of ten engineers serving each group and disregarding the fact that there are those who serve in multiple groups, there may be close to 250 engineers serving IEM in a variety of capacities and roles in any given session. Put that in relation to the overall membership of 15,000, we have more than 98% of generally passive membership. Perhaps more revealing is the observation of recycling of committee members through the years. One may argue that this is not necessarily a bad development as these people help keep the institution going. However, the lack of induction and infusion of new members, both in terms of numbers and frequency, into the IEM machinery cannot honestly be viewed as beneficial to the long-term well-being of IEM.

Is the spirit of volunteerism waning in IEM? If so, why? More important is perhaps how we can rekindle and further enlarge the fire of volunteerism in IEM. While one can appeal to the altruistic inclination in us, we are severely limited by the amount of time available for such a pursuit. It is not coincident then that the most common reported reason for not volunteering is the lack of time. To a large extent, this can be circumvented by arranging meetings /activities during after-work hours and weekends. The technology savvy will perhaps capitalize on

Internet-enabled cyber meetings among virtual communities where physical presence is not required. For members residing outside the Klang Valley or state-IEM's headquarters, this is especially appealing, not to mention the added benefit of helping IEM to embrace the advances in telecommunication as befitting a knowledge organisation.

In other words, there are ways and means whereby an engineer's voluntary works in IEM can be structured such that they pose minimum inconvenience to the aspiring member.

On the positive side, to the extent that most humans are driven by self interests, there is a whole litany of benefits to be accrued from volunteering, if one does not take things for granted:

- learn a new skill, such as communication, even chairing a meeting;
- meet new people, both engineers and non-engineers;
- share a gift or talent, such as ICT skills/knowledge;
- work with individuals with a similar interest or conviction;
- help advance the objectives of the Institution;
- add to your resume (just imagine there are numerous standing committees and technical divisions);
- spend time with friends and family in a noncompetitive, and perhaps mutually supportive environment;
- break the monotony of the daily grind where a trip to IEM can be likened to an escapade from the hustle and bustle;

- see what you're capable of and how far you can advance in the IEM hierarchy or test your popularity among engineers;
- share and partake of the untold engineering experiences that make up the IEM membership;
- just being able to witness and be privy to the multifarious interactions of the many engineer characters and personalities that never fail to unfold in IEM meetings; and
- afford an opportunity to travel courtesy of IEM and to represent IEM in international engineering forums.

Of course volunteering should not be restricted to just IEM. I'm sure there are members who serve other non-profit organisations selflessly and failure to serve in IEM is not tantamount to absence of volunteerism amongst engineers. They may view themselves as social workers serving a larger purpose by helping the needy.

There are many roles that an engineer volunteer can assume in IEM: committee members (ExComm, Council, Standing Comm, technical division, organizing events/seminars/talks/activities), paper writers/reviewers, PI interviewers, speakers in IEM functions, commentators of all things IEM, down to being a passive member who dutifully pays his/her dues year in and year out. Yes, even the last category passes as an engineer volunteer as he/she fulfills the three criteria of not for financial reward, of free will, and of benefits to the Institution as the dues help defray the cost of running the Institution.

Speaking as a long-time member

of IEM and having served in various capacities in IEM, I can surely attest to all the benefits just described. But more than that, it's a feeling of self-worth, of being able to contribute, of being able to share, and of being able to cultivate friendship that lasts.

I'm mindful of the saying that one can indeed go far, and be happy I might add, as long as one does not mind where the credit goes to. And this certainly applies in voluntary works in IEM. It has also been said that volunteers are effectively the brain and blood of a society. Again, this is true of IEM. However, aspiring engineer volunteers should be forewarned so as not to volunteer their time because they have to. But to do it because they want to. It should not be a guilt-ridden decision. Neither should it be ostentatiously driven by the potential business networking opportunity that such involvement may engender.

Having said the above, there are also avenues for IEM to promote and indeed reward volunteering efforts. These are social reinforcers rather than monetary reinforcers. A pat on the back, a letter of appreciation, a mention of gratitude, a word of praise: these are surefire ways of positive reinforcement that help maintain a healthy flux of volunteers, both in and out of IEM. In addition, these reinforcers must be dispensed with sincerity, specificity, immediacy, and through personal delivery.

In concluding, I would like to urge these engineer volunteers to step forth and be counted. You will never regret the indulgence, if I can call it that, just like I didn't. Happy volunteering! ■