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My Annual Comments Encouraging More Personal Interaction

Gary Breed
Editorial Director



Many engineers prefer to be “left to their own devices,” as the old saying goes. But sometimes you need to get away from those devices, instruments and computers, and get some face time with other engineers, instructors, mentors—and maybe even the sales and marketing staff.

Personal contact is a basic human need. Some people need a lot, some less so—I keep returning to this subject to remind us all that interaction *is* needed at some level!

It’s also practical. While written information is highly valuable, there is always more to learn from unwritten verbal communication, not to mention the back-and-forth brainstorming that happens when engineers get to talking about their current design challenge—or, as in my case, any interesting technical topic. Also, the classroom environment is high on my list of important face-to-face learning opportunities.

My reminders for writing this month’s column are the upcoming Wireless and Microwave Conference (WAMICON—underway by the time you read this) in Clearwater Beach, Florida, and June’s International Microwave Symposium (IMS) in Baltimore. These are two different conference venues; WAMICON is a small conference with around 200 attendance, while IMS has as many as 10,000 people attending—2,500 or more IMS delegates, more at the smaller conferences and meetings held concurrently, plus those focusing on the accompanying major trade show.

The environment at IMS is stimulating—lots of activity, many people and a chance to check out the latest high frequency products that you need for that next design assignment. However, the quality of papers at small conferences like WAMICON is every bit as high as those at IMS, and the smaller, more intimate environment provides an opportunity for an extended talk with the authors, and with the engineers, professors and graduate students who are attending. There are exhibitors at small conferences, too. With a smaller crowd, there are opportunities to talk at length with company representatives.

One of my motivations for attending a specific paper, instead of simply reading it in the Proceedings, is to hear the comments made during the oral presentation and see the author’s slides. It is typical for additional

material to be included in the live talk, since many conferences have a limit on the length of submitted papers, usually 4 to 6 pages. Of course, there is also a chance to ask questions after the talk, perhaps continuing into lunch or coffee break time if the discussion is especially interesting!

Many Reasons for Personal Interaction

Here's a list of additional reasons why a live meeting or event may be necessary, or at least highly valuable:

Planning—Meetings during the initial definition of system parameters and specifications always require lots of input and discussion. Part of this process can be done via e-mail and reports, but the interactive process of a face-to-face meeting is often the most efficient

way to examine different options.

Problem-solving—The collective experience of a group can be truly impressive! When difficulties arise, a community effort will almost always reach a solution faster than an analysis by one person.

Collaboration across different specialties—In today's engineering environment, design, manufacturing, and test are involved at all times, not to mention concurrent electronic, mechanical, thermal and ergonomic design efforts. When those different areas intersect, a meeting—or even a phone call—can be the fastest and easiest way to begin a cooperative effort.

Psychology—I don't want to delve too deeply into things, but there is no doubt that face-to-face contact helps build teamwork. When you know something about your colleagues at a personal level,

it is usually easier to communicate, especially if there are problems to be addressed.

Another of the important feelings that personal contact imparts is reinforcement. We like to know that the other members of the design team are doing their part, and have an interest in each others' parts of the project.

So that's my encouragement for 2011. Don't hide in your office or cubicle; do a little walking around. If you telecommute, be sure to make good use of meetings and maintain regular contact, even if it's not always face-to-face.

Finally, don't forget to keep learning. Classroom study, short courses and conferences all have a role in your professional development, and the personal contacts you make there can last a lifetime!