Planning for an Inevitable Future

As we celebrate its 65th birthday in 2011, the question is whether the IEEE Computer Society is prepared for the next 65, or 25, or even 5 years.

One morning about 30 years ago, I was about to head off to work (at IBM) when I noticed my eight-year-old son at the keyboard of my brand-new Apple II+ computer. My first reaction was to yell at him for playing with my new toy, but I was overtaken by an uncharacteristic moment of calm. For a few minutes I watched him and began to realize that something unique was going on. A child was using a computer console to key commands directly to an OS.

Okay, so you might argue that it was a really primitive console and a simple OS, but so what? After a couple of years, when the “computer revolution” really took hold with the introduction of the IBM PC, it became clear that a new social era was upon us—one that removed control of computing environments operational and useful.

About three months ago, I had another aha! moment, this time while watching my 2½-year-old granddaughter navigate the menus of her dad’s iPhone. It seems that others too have had this moment. In recent months, The New York Times and USA Today have presented reports describing toddlers’ interest, obsession, and skills with the multitude of “iThings” that are starting to flood the consumer market. Journalists are likening this to the late 1940s, when television technology was first consumerized, eventually changing society worldwide.

ARE WE READY?

And so I began to think about what this could mean to us, as members of “the world’s leading membership organization for computing professionals.” While we celebrate the Computer Society’s 65th birthday in 2011, considering the accelerating pace of the commoditization of computing, the question is whether the Society is prepared for the next 65, or 25, or even 5 years.

It’s becoming increasingly clear to me that IT, however it’s defined, is becoming part of society’s physical infrastructure—along with roads and highways, the power grid, and water distribution. And it’s also becoming clear that there’s an increasingly large and growing audience of computing professionals who are not, strictly speaking, part of the IT culture the Computer Society has been serving since its inception. A stark reality is that with the advent of packaged IT products such as open source object libraries, outsourced IT cloud services, and even nanotechnology-embedded applications, the next generation of computer users will neither know nor care what lies under the hood of their computing appliances.

So the question that we must ask ourselves as Computer Society members and volunteers is, do we continue to focus our energies on a diminishing percentage of IT professionals who make all this happen, or should we be realigning our mission...
toward social changes that are clearly taking place, that are clearly upon us?

About four years ago, the CS, for a variety of reasons, began to transform our organizational structure from what it was then to what it is now—a slimmed-down, highly efficient, and cost-effective professional entity that serves about 75,000 members worldwide. That transformation, which has been very successful, has taken incredible dedication by executive director Angela Burgess, her staff, and the CS volunteers who have served in office since it began.

**A NEW TRANSFORMATION**

I believe it’s time to consider a new transformation—one that addresses the societal changes I have described. To this end, I will be working with the new 2011 Board of Governors members to begin to plan for such a transformation. Working with me on this are the 2011 Executive Committee members: David Alan Grier, first vice president (and VP of publications); Jon Rokne, second vice president (and BoG secretary); Jim Moore, treasurer; Roger Fujii, VP of standards; Liz Burd, VP of educational activities; Paul Croll, VP of technical and conferences activities; Paul Joanneau, VP of professional activities; and Phil Laplante, Electronic Products and Services Committee chair.

Of course, we all owe a debt of gratitude to the 2010 Board under the leadership of Jim Isaak, without whose work and ideas these ambitions would never have become obvious. We will miss Stephen L. Diamond, Itaru Mimura, Christina M. Schober, Sattupathu V. Sankaran, Ann E.K. Sobel, and Jeffrey M. Voas, who are departing from the Board, but I’m sure that each of them will continue to work toward this transformation.

While we begin to plan for our inevitable future, we have to be practical and develop plans and activities that will continue to be the foundation of our current vision and goals. Although it’s unlikely that the debate over whether we’re academic or practitioner oriented will cease, another thing that won’t cease will be our efforts to serve both kinds of members.

To this end, this year I’ll be creating a new ad hoc Academic Advisory Board, similar to our Industry Advisory Board created two years ago, to help steer our academic foundation toward the future. We take great pride in both the quality of our publications and conferences and the work of all the volunteers who develop and organize them. But because of the technology-driven social changes that influence our professional lives—from the open access movement, to the popularity of e-learning, to the emergence and acceptance of webinars, podcasts, and so on—it’s clear that we must constantly review and examine all the products and services we offer to our academic membership.

At the same time, we won’t decrease in any way the continued development of our practitioner-oriented products and services. For example, we’re currently working with other IEEE societies to develop a new set of career retraining workshops to be launched later in 2011. Through this work, as part of a new member recruitment initiative, we’ll soon be releasing a new, all-electronic bundle of software engineering products that include IEEE Software and *IT Professional* magazines, selected ReadyNotes, Essential Sets, and webinars related to software engineering, as well as discount coupons to enable members to more easily prepare for certification in our Certified Software Developer Associate/Professional programs.

Not forgotten in all of this are our students. To date, we’ve been focusing our Build Your Career and Jobs Board on already-graduated CS members. This year, we’ll be extending those websites to include career-building services for students that feature solicitation and publication of internships and co-op opportunities, as well as mentoring services. One of the new elements that we will introduce as part of this effort will be discussion forums to enable student members to interact with other students all over the world.

Key to this effort will be the extension of Instant Communities, the social network service conceived by 2010 President Jim Isaak, to a completely new service called Special Technical Communities. By the end of 2011, we’ll have launched pilot STCs in social networking, cloud computing, gaming, education, software engineering, and green computing.

A foundational element of STCs are social networking technologies, without which it would be impossible to reach out to our geographically diverse members to enable them to work together in their shared fields of interests. One strength of both IEEE and the Computer Society is this geographic diversity. In 2011, in concert with IEEE’s Globalization Initiative and eMembership option for emerging countries, I intend to reach out and visit chapters that sometimes don’t get the attention they deserve, particularly in the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) countries. While it’s not always easy to visit

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everyone in person, I intend to organize a series of electronic meetings in which other senior volunteers and I will “meet” chapter members located outside North America.

AN OPEN INVITATION

Finally, I’d like to invite both members and nonmembers who want to communicate with me to participate in two social networking activities that I’ll be using this year. The first is an extension to the President’s blog that Kathy Land started in 2009 (www.computer.org/portal/web/the-presidents-discussion-corner).

We’re relaunching that site with a slightly different message format. Each month, I’ll be posting a very short video blog about an issue, announcement, or topic of interest, controversy, or importance that I invite you to visit and engage in via the threaded discussion there. The videos and their related discussions will be archived and available for revisiting throughout the year. The second activity that I’m launching is a new Twitter site: @ieeeCSPresident. I intend to use Twitter throughout the year to share my ideas, insights, and observations as I proudly represent all members of the IEEE Computer Society at conferences, chapter meetings, and other CS-related events.

Please let me know what you think. While we try very hard to meet our members’ needs, we need your input to be sure we’re doing a good job for you.

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Selected CS articles and columns are available for free at http://ComputingNow.computer.org.