Dear Colleagues,

International organizations, such as ASIS&T, have responsibilities and considerations that local and national organizations do not have. International organizations also provide many benefits to their members that local and national organizations cannot provide. These include the opportunity to learn from – and share expertise and knowledge with – colleagues who have different expertise and knowledge. Organizations can be international in their deeds (what they do) and words (what they say.) Being international in both deeds and name is often vital to organizations such as ours and a strong indicator of our collective embrace of geographic diversity.

Deeds

Recognizing that individuals around the globe face different economic and social conditions, the Board recently unanimously approved a motion to offer a reduced membership fee to individuals residing in countries that the United Nations identifies annually as countries with medium and low human development achievement using the Human Development Index. The UN Human Development Index is updated annually in the UN’s Human Development Report [1] and takes into account economics and “the range of things that people can do or be in life” [2]. The reduced fee is $40.00 per year, which is identical to the current fee for students and members experiencing financial difficulties.
The motion was based on a proposal developed by Daniel Alemneh, SIG/III president, in collaboration with SIG/III officers. Our thanks to Daniel and his colleagues for their hard work in developing the proposal.

Words

When I was growing up, common phrases were “actions speak louder than words” and “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” As I grew older, I learned that contrary to these sayings, words matter. What we name things influences behavior. As Buddha eloquently said, “Whatever words we utter should be chosen with care for people will hear them and be influenced by them for good or ill.” Jean-Paul Sartre also commented, “Words are more treacherous and powerful than we think” [3].

One word in the name of our organization has different implications for members. The word American can make it difficult for members outside the United States to get support and receive recognition for belonging to and participating in ASIS&T. For other members, it may reflect a national pride and distinction. The name is a branding that, depending on our various perspectives, can be seen to add prestige or make it challenging to participate in the organization.

Some members have suggested keeping the name and establishing close ties with similar organizations outside the United States. This approach was tried for several years; however, ASIS&T has much greater disciplinary breadth than other information science organizations, and matching counterparts in other countries often don’t exist. Our membership includes practitioners, researchers and institutions, and we focus on the interplay of people, information, technology and social structures. ASIS&T is unique.

Others have suggested it’s too soon to change our name again. As you may know, our organization was founded in 1937 as the American Documentation Institute (ADI). In 1968 the name officially became the American Society for Information Science. In 2000 “and Technology” was added to the name. Yet if we keep the acronym, ASIS&T, might this concern be mitigated? And couldn’t changing the name help show we are not a static organization, but a dynamic, thoughtful, learning organization that embraces geographic diversity?

What might ASIS&T stand for, if not “American Society for Information Science and Technology”? Suggestions range from “Awesome Society for Information Science and Technology” to “Association for Information Science and Technology.” (Truth be told there were a few more suggestions but it’s probably best not to mention the other adjectives beginning with the letter “a” which were suggested...) The word association is defined as “an organization of people with a common purpose and having a formal structure...friendship, companionship...connection or combination” [4]. These meanings seem very applicable to ASIS&T. We have a common purpose to “advance the information sciences and related applications of information technology by providing focus, opportunity and support to information professionals and organizations” [5]. There are many friendships among members. We connect ideas and practices through our interactions and sharing at Annual Meetings, workshops, seminars, webinars, papers and other documents.
To change any aspect of our name requires a vote by the membership (which has declined 28% since 2005). Three quarters of the members voting on this type of proposed change is needed to approve the change. I would like to invite all members to comment on the proposal to keep the acronym and change its wording to “ASsociation for Information Science & Technology.” A discussion page has been created for this purpose. To access the discussion page, go to www.quicktopic.com/47/H/bvJVhSC8HTs. The page will be open for comments until May 1, 2012. At that time the Board will consider whether or not to call for a membership vote on this issue.

William Morris remarked, “It took me years to understand that words are often as important as experience, because words make experience last” [3]. Thus I urge all members to thoughtfully listen to, and constructively respect, different perspectives on this issue.

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Resources Mentioned in the Column


